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Openness Essential with Grieving Children

By Margaret Harding

Children grieving the death of a murdered Shaler third-grader need truth and reassurance from adults, grief experts said on Tuesday.

"We need to be aware when a classmate or sibling dies, a child's first fears are going to be, 'Can this happen to me? Can it happen to someone I love? Will it happen again?' " said Andrea Lurier, program manager for Highmark's Caring Place, a free facility that helps children with grief. "As family and a community, we need to reassure a child that we will do what we can to keep them safe."

Quinn Gasparre, 7; her sister Nina Gasparre-Hardesty, 1; and their mother, Lynette Gasparre, 38, were shot to death at their home on Beulah Street on Sunday. Police said Lynette Gasparre's live-in boyfriend, Barry Hardesty, 43, killed the three before turning the Taurus .357 pistol on himself. Allegheny County police released no new details about the investigation on Tuesday.

Friends of Lynette Gasparre's family came to the home yesterday afternoon to remove a pet hamster and tarantula that belonged to Quinn, and other belongings. They didn't want to give their names and said the family is grieving in private.

"In a case like this, adults don't even understand why or how to explain what happened to ourselves," said Allison Holst, bereavement specialist with Family Hospice and Palliative Care in Mt. Lebanon. "It's very hard to talk to children in a language they can understand."

Quinn was on track to finish the third grade at Highcliff Elementary School in Ross, where the family lived until moving to Shaler this month. District spokeswoman Tina Vojtko said Monday that a team of grief counselors was on hand to talk to students. She was not available to comment Tuesday.

To help children cope, Lurier suggests encouraging them to write a letter to the victim or create a memory box. "Even though someone has died, the relationship doesn't die," Lurier said. "It continues on in memories."

Adults should be as honest as possible in explaining what happened and what it means to be dead, Lurier said. "In our effort to be gentle or protective, we use words like, 'Grandma went to sleep,' or 'passed.' That can be confusing because sleep is something children do every night," Lurier said.

At 7 years of age, children will begin to question the biology of death and what happens to the body, said Diana Hardy, program manager and intern field supervisor of the Good Grief Center for Bereavement Support. They also can have "magical thinking," she said. "They think death can be a form of punishment, so we want to explain it's nothing that they did," Hardy said. "Children sometimes think they can wish something and it will come true, so it's important that they know it's not their fault."

Parents who notice drastic changes in a child's behavior that last an extended period of time following a death may want to have the child evaluated, Lurier said. It is normal for children to want reassurance they will be safe, to ask about things they've heard and to check on their parents more often after a death.

"It is so difficult for all of us when a child dies," Lurier said. "We wish there was some magic thing we could do to make it OK and take the fears away, but we can't."