Illness and other serious problems in the family

- **Do children guess** there is something wrong?
- **How** can we find out what they know?
- **What do they understand** about illness and dying?
- **Are they afraid?**
- **How can we help them** to talk about their fears?
- **Who can help us** to talk about our own future death?
- **How much detail** do we tell our children?
- How can we **comfort and support** them?
- **Who else can they talk to** about illness and problems in our family?
- **Who will help us parents** to find the right words?



ILLUSTRATION BY JANE SHEPHERD – taken from "We Miss You All" – published by W.A.S.N. Zimbabwe

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Do children guess there is something wrong?

They know from seeing changes:
- in the household routine.
- in your behaviour.
- in your appearence.
- the visit of the health workers in the 'TASO' van.
- the strangers who come to the house.

They learn from others:
- relatives
- friends
- neighbours
- peers
- overheard talk
- gossip

How do we kow if they have guessed?

We know from:
- the questions they ask.
- from changes in their behaviour.
  - clingy
  - badly behaved
  - withdrawn
  - miserable
- from things they talk about to each other other.

What do children understand about death and dying?

It depends on age.

You need to listen closely to them to find out what they know and understand.

How can we help them?

Answer their questions as honestly and as best you can.

Don't use words like 'left', 'lost', 'passed away' in place of the words die, death and dead. It will cause confusion.

Read stories, tell stories about dying.

Show physically your love and support.

Share happy memories with your children.

Start a Memory Book with your children.

Do they want to be told?

Often children already know the truth but feel unable to speak about it unless the parent gives permission.

Children have curiosity - it is what allows them to learn. The have a need to know what is going on and how it will affect them and the people they care about.

Children may sense something awful is happening and might have imagined fears, distresses and concerns which are more terrifying than the actual facts. He/she might appear not interested in talking to you because he is frightened of what they might hear.