



The
Compassionate
Friends

Grieving Child Loss in Blended and Step Families

A nationwide organisation of bereaved parents and their families offering support after a child dies.

Grieving Child Loss in Blended and Step Families

When a child of any age dies, as parents we are heartbroken. Families come in all shapes and sizes, and our particular family environment can add a layer of complexity to the process of coping with our grief.

Our current partner may not be our first. They may be the step-parent of our natural children, and may have also brought their own children into our household. Our child could have come into our life through adoption or fostering. Our child may not live under our roof, but with their other parent from our former relationship. Our adult children may live in blended families of their own.

Negotiating life in a blended family has its own challenges as we manage our various relationships. It is not surprising that coping with the loss of a child in this environment also brings its own complexities.

Our child's step-parent

We are all individuals and cope differently with grief. The process of readjustment to a life without our deceased child or children may not be the same for our partner, whether or not our partner is the child's other biological parent.

Still, a parent's bond with their child begins before birth, and it is only natural that a child's step-parent, who has not been there from the beginning, will have a slightly different relationship to our own.

There is no experience more devastating to a parent than losing a child. When our child was not that of our partner, we may experience some feelings of isolation as we realise that our partner, no matter how supportive, and no matter how much they are grieving in their own way, cannot completely share in all we are going through.

It is important to communicate our needs to our partner at this time. Without this communication, they may be at a loss as to how to best support us, and may even feel that we are pushing them away as we seem totally absorbed in our grief, particularly in the early period of shock at our loss.

If our teenage or adult child's life choices led to their early death, such as through substance misuse or suicide, or dangerous activities such as extreme sports, the shock of their passing may be particularly acute. We may struggle to make sense of what has happened and to cope with the anguish we feel. It is possible that our partner may silently blame our child for the hurt that they perceive has been unfairly inflicted upon us. As they watch us disintegrate in sorrow and then labour to get back up on our feet, they may feel angry with our child. If this is expressed, we may instinctively defend our child, whilst also feeling conflicted in our own emotions towards them. Attending a relevant support group together may help us understand these differing feelings.

Our partner is part of our life. We are together because we love each other, and the hurt we feel at the loss of our child

hurts them, no matter what their relationship was with our child. Their hurt is not quite the same as ours, but it is hurt, nevertheless. Comprehending this will go a long way towards preventing our different responses to our child's death creating a barrier between us.

Our child's other biological parent

The death of our child may bring their other parent back into our lives to a greater extent than in the recent past. They are likely to be involved in the funeral. We may find ourselves seeing them more than we have recently, as sharing our mutual memories can bring us comfort. This can be hard on our current partner who can feel left out. Hopefully with open communication, they will be comfortable with this situation.

On the other hand, our child's passing may worsen our relationship with their other parent. Unresolved issues from our past lives together can become amplified. There can be elements of blame, as our child passed away whilst under the care of one parent, but not the other. This can cause great anguish.

Our child may have grown closer to their step-parent than their natural parent. Whether this was the case or not, their other biological parent may choose to keep a distance for their own reasons, perhaps not wishing even to be involved in funeral arrangements or anything else. This can cause us to feel they are abandoning our child and to become angry on their behalf. If this is sadly the case, let us take comfort in knowing that our child still has two parents who have chosen to love them: ourselves and our partner.

In all of these scenarios, it is vital that we keep our current partner informed, so that they can support us through this difficult time.

Our relationship with our step-children

Whether our child passed away as an infant, child or adult, it is natural to look around and compare other's lives to the life that *could* have been theirs, or more likely we will feel *should* have been theirs.

In blended families there may be children of previous relationships all living in the same house as one family. This could involve our own other children as well as those of our partner. It is very easy to feel a sense of resentment and perhaps even envy, as we see our partner enjoying the company of their natural children while our 'half' of the family struggles to come to terms with the loss of our child.

If we have lost our only – or all – of our natural children, this can actually become more difficult as time goes by. In the initial period after our child's death, the loss of our child was probably the focus of the entire household. Funeral arrangements and the initial period of grieving encompassed everyone under our roof. However, as months pass, the focus naturally shifts to the living. As the years go by, our step-children grow and experience life in all of its ups and downs. Whilst we celebrate their birthdays, special occasions and achievements, we may be sometimes overwhelmed with sadness that our own child is not here to experience the same. Watching our step-children can reinforce how much we miss our own child whom we have lost. We are likely to imagine

what they would have been doing at this stage of life, how they would have performed in their exams, what it would have been like to see them off to university or watch them get married, and maybe even have children of their own.

We may want to find ways to include our missing child in the family, so that we can at least draw comfort in memories. Some may hold a small celebration for their child's birthday, or perhaps encourage everyone in the family to make a charitable donation in their name on their anniversary.

We may also feel conflicted regarding our child's possessions. Do we allow our step-children to play with their toys, take over their old room, wear their clothes? What will we do about what should have been our child's inheritance? Do we give it instead to our step-children? These are all very personal matters and we must find our own solutions. It is advisable to make no hurried decisions. How we feel in the immediate aftermath of our child's passing may change in the years to come.

When we are the step-parent of the child that died

If we are the step-parent of the child who has died we may feel totally inadequate as to how to support our partner as we will not be feeling the loss in the same way. We may have loved our step-child dearly and perhaps even brought them up from a young age, but the truth is that they are not our natural child and so we may find it hard to comprehend the magnitude of the loss.

If we have our own children, we may need to understand that for our partner it may be very painful to see life continuing as normal for us and our children, and that this new way of living without their child will take time and patience.

We may experience feelings of guilt that this happened to our partner's child and not to one of our natural children. Such feelings can increase our sense of helplessness.

We may feel that our partner is not giving us time or attention anymore as they will be lost in their grieving and we may end up feeling resentful and hurt that they don't seem to need us.

We may also want to spend even more time with our own children as we will be so aware of the affect the loss of our partner's child is having. Again, this can be particularly hard for our partner as it will be something they will never be able to experience again with their own child.

(See the TCF leaflet *The Death of a Step-Child* for more on this.)

Supporting the children of our blended family following the loss of a child

For the children of the blended family, there will be separate issues to address following the loss of the child in the family. For both natural and step siblings, there will be the agony and heartache that comes from trying to cope with the loss of their sibling. For the step-siblings there may also be feelings of guilt that they are still alive, accompanied by confusion as to how to behave in the face of their step-parent's grief.

Please see the TCF leaflet, *Our Surviving Children*, for more advice on helping children cope with the loss of their sibling.

Other family members

Many of us are part of an extended family – parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts. When we marry, the circle grows to include in-laws. If in time we separate and live with a new partner, the extended family may grow even more, with another set of relations. We might expect with such a diverse family circle, that there would be plenty of support for us, but this is not always the case.

Some families come together at times of tragedy; others find that pre-existing conflicts are amplified. This can be hard for us to deal with when we are in the midst of raw grief. We might find ourselves disappointed or even angry at their reactions, at petty disagreements that have not been resolved despite the enormity of our loss, at those who do not seem to grasp just how profoundly we have been affected by the loss of our child.

It is likely that everyone is grieving, but in their own way. The love of families can help pull us through, but if it is not forthcoming, we can seek our comfort elsewhere. As a mother or father who has lost a child, we need to take care of ourselves, and not feel overly responsible for the wider circle of family members.

Going forward

We may discover that our tragic loss binds our blended family together in new ways, despite the complexity of our relationships. We go forward, finding our footing in a world that has been forever changed by the loss of our child.

Finding ways to keep our child's memory alive in our home and family can bring us comfort. We learn to live with our grief as best as we are able. (See TCF Leaflet, *Living with Grief*, for more on this.)

Communicating with other bereaved parents can help us realise that we are not alone in what we are experiencing. The TCF forum and private Facebook pages are safe places online to express our feelings and listen to others (Visit **www.tcf.org.uk** for more information). Connecting with others who can appreciate and understand what we are going through can be a great support. Some of us may turn to helplines, such as The Compassionate Friends (TCF) Helpline or a national or local bereavement service.

Our heartbreak of the loss of our child will be at the centre of our life for a long while, but as time passes, we will feel better able to manage the “new normal” in our blended family. We will be able to live in love with our partner and surviving children, whether biological or step-children, or both, and enjoy our lives together. The love we all share can be part of the memorial for our dear deceased child, who will always be a part of us and of our family.

Who are the Compassionate Friends?

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) was founded in 1969 by a hospital chaplain and a group of bereaved parents who recognised the lack of support and understanding they were receiving from those who had not suffered in this way. This leaflet aims to share the experiences of all of us bereaved parents and most especially those aspects which came upon us so suddenly and, sometimes, with no warning.

The reading of this leaflet may be your first real contact with TCF. We hope it has given you a little comfort, perhaps showing you that your pain and worries are shared by others. TCF publishes over 30 leaflets, on different aspects of grief which follow the death of a child. All of them are available at no charge to bereaved parents and siblings (but a small donation is, of course, always welcome).

If you would like to hear more about our work and access further support, you could ring our Helpline, number on the back page of this leaflet, and you will be able to talk to one of our volunteers, all of them bereaved parents. He or she could give you the number of a Local Contact and details of any Local Group which may meet regularly in your area. You could also find out from them details of our occasional retreats, when a small number of bereaved parents meet and talk in peaceful surroundings. Most years there is a weekend gathering, to which all members are invited.

Our website at www.tcf.org.uk has more information about our services, how to join TCF as a donating member, private Facebook groups, and support forum where bereaved parents can 'talk' online . We also publish a quarterly journal, *Compassion*, containing articles and poems written by our members about their own experiences. And, if you would also like further reading, please contact our Library for details and recommendations of books on all aspects of bereavement.



The
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Friends**

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