



The
Compassionate
Friends

Helping Bereaved Parents

Suggestions for professionals and
those in support roles



The Compassionate Friends is a national charity supporting parents and siblings who are bereaved through child loss. This leaflet has been written by parents who have lost children of all ages in the hope that our insights can help you support bereaved families with whom you are in contact in a professional capacity.

Helping Bereaved Parents

Suggestions for professionals and those in support roles

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) is an organisation of bereaved parents and their families offering support and understanding to other bereaved parents after the death of their son or daughter, at any age and from any cause.

This leaflet is addressed to any professionals who have contact with bereaved parents. This could include health workers, GPs, nurses and clinicians, ministers of religion and faith leaders, bank staff, benefits and housing officers, social workers, and others.

Depending on your profession, you may have more or less experience in supporting bereaved parents. Possibly your organisation may have some policies regarding this.

You may have a single encounter with a bereaved parent or you may have ongoing interactions. You may meet them almost immediately after their child dies or in the following months and years. Some families will already be known to you, whilst you may be meeting others for the first time. Your contact may be in person or over the phone.

We hope that the following, gleaned from our own experiences, will provide you with insights and perhaps new ideas for good practice in supporting the bereaved parents you encounter. Thank you for taking the time to read this leaflet.

The Pain of Child Bereavement

All deaths bring sadness and grief, perhaps none more so than that of a child. We would never expect that our child would die before we do. When a child dies, parents experience all the 'normal' feelings of bereavement: disbelief, shock, horror, guilt, anger, blame, regret, loneliness and anguish, but these grief feelings

intensify because it is a child who has died. The age at which our son or daughter died will not matter as much as our appalling sense of loss that their life has been cut short, as have our expectations and dreams for the future.

The circumstances vary: In some cases, a parent may have anticipated the loss of their child, having cared for them through an illness or disability, but even so, it is probable that they will be in a state of shock. Sudden deaths, either unexpected such as through a road traffic incident or suicide, or following a sudden or prolonged illness can particularly devastate families. Each parent is experiencing their worst nightmare from which there is no waking up, and their loss will have a profound impact on them.

If their 'child' was an adult, parents may suddenly be faced with new responsibilities for grandchildren or face financial implications. For others, the death has left them without any child or descendants. The future can seem bleak.

As bereaved parents, we may feel isolated. Society at large has lost many of the mourning rituals, once routinely accepted, that helped families in their sadness. People tend to react with embarrassment and withdrawal at the mention of death.

Note: Although this leaflet is written primarily regarding bereaved parents, there are others who will be affected by the loss of a child for whom this advice could be applicable, such as adult brothers and sisters, grandparents and other close family members.

Bereaved Parents Need:

People to understand that whilst we have many things in common, we are all different

It is well recognised that grief has an impact on a person's wellbeing in physical, emotional and psychological ways, and a profound loss, such as the loss of a child, can intensify this impact. Although many aspects of grief are common, we are each a unique individual, with our own personality, family relationships and belief systems. We also have our own cultural and religious customs in terms of funeral

practices and responses to death. It will be helpful if you could take this into account and not make assumptions about our wishes or behaviour.

To hear our child's name

It is very important for most parents to hear our child's name rather than a more de-personalised reference. Getting the name right is of course vital; the name we call our child, be it a pet name or a short form, is most likely what we would like to hear, although we realise that in formal situations our child's full name will be used.

Safe places to express our emotions

Every parent responds differently to their loss, but most of us will benefit from having someone who will take the time to listen to us without judgement, acknowledging that there is no right or wrong way to grieve. Empathy with the multiple challenges we are facing, from the practical to the emotional, can also help. Grief itself can be an extremely exhausting process, and even the simplest tasks can feel overwhelming.

Consideration for our circumstances

Some of us have a partner or close family members who will support us; others are coping alone. Some of us have other surviving children to care for; others do not. Some of us may be struggling financially, including such matters as taking care of our child's funeral. We may have to navigate the benefits system or manage expectations of our employer.

Some issues might seem mundane but can be mountains for us to climb, such as needing to return medical equipment to a hospital or to visit our child's school to collect their belongings. Other issues could tend to overwhelm us and last for a long time: If our child's death was unexpected or violent, we may be dealing with media attention and the prospect of an inquest and/or trial involving those responsible.

Any and all of these issues will compound the grief that we are dealing with. It may take us some time to get on top of practical

matters. Your kind consideration of our circumstances could make a big difference in how we cope. Being able to accommodate us, even arranging home visits, could be an extra step of kindness.

Patience and support in decision-making

Our child's death will have many practical implications. If our interaction with you involves any decision-making, please be patient with us. Although we may ask you questions and try to listen to the information you provide, we may find it difficult to concentrate and to take everything on board. As a result, we may need extra time and an opportunity to return later to continue the conversation, if possible.

Providing us with information on paper could be helpful, and/or possibly in alternative formats, depending on our particular access needs.

Signposting to The Compassionate Friends

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) is a national support group composed of parents and relatives bereaved of a child or children. A 'child' can be anyone from an unborn baby to an adult. All members of TCF have lost children or adult siblings, and can remember the initial helplessness and the need to talk about our loss. Our particular strength lies in our shared experience. We also have groups for those bereaved in particular ways (by suicide, substance use, homicide, for those who are now childless, and for grandparents); some correspond via our newsletter or our website, some meet occasionally, some hold regular meetings.

We are here to help and befriend any bereaved parent, and above all to listen to them as they try to work their way through their grief.

One simple way of helping a bereaved parent is to ensure that they have heard of TCF's work. A phone call to our Helpline **0345 123 2304** or a visit to our website at **www.tcf.org.uk**, by you or them, will put them in touch with all of our services, provided at no cost to bereaved parents.

An understanding that the grief of a parent is life-long

The loss of our child changes us for ever. We will have times when the grief is manageable, and other occasions – even years into the future - when it is difficult to bear. If it is appropriate to the relationship, a phone call from time to time and/or a pastoral visit could be very helpful for us. Some of the worst times are often the anniversary of our child's death, their birthday, and the major festivals, such as Christmas, Mothers' and Fathers' Days, and the New Year. It is then that the gaping hole in our family is felt most acutely.

The following are some more specific comments for different professions:

Medical Staff Who Cared for Our Child

- If you are able to break bad news sensitively, as well as preparing us if we are about to see our child's body for the first time, it may help make a horrific situation a little easier to bear, although we are still likely to become very emotional.
- We would appreciate a private space for such conversations with you, as well as to be given a chance to gather our thoughts alone.
- Try to use simple/familiar language, rather than medical terminology, unless you are aware of our knowledge of this.
- We may look to you for answers, trying to rationalise what happened to our child. In the pain of the moment, we may seek someone to blame. This could be our child's medical team or it could be ourselves. Reassurance that everything that could have been done for our child was done will be helpful.
- If there have been problems or issues that contributed to our child's death that will require investigation, please keep us informed. Kindness will never go amiss, no matter what the circumstances.

- We may later decide that we would like to work with you in some way, for example, raising money for our child's ward or the treatment he/she received. Your encouragement for this will be appreciated.
- If you have been caring for our child, you may wish to attend the funeral and/or send flowers. You could contact us (the parents) to find out our wishes.

Medical Staff Who Care for Us

This section is for GPs, nurses and any staff in a medical setting.

- Grief following the death of a child is quite likely to be prolonged and intense. Your support in managing the physical and psychological impact of our bereavement will be appreciated.
- The trauma of our bereavement can exacerbate existing conditions or it could make us worry about symptoms. All of this will need care and attention.
- It might be helpful for staff to be made aware of our bereavement and possible emotional reactions, with our permission, if we need medical tests or treatment. It is likely to be particularly difficult for us if we are required to return to the location where our child was treated and/or died.

Those Dealing with Financial Matters and/or Benefits

This section is for bank staff, social workers, benefits and housing officers, and anyone who might encounter bereaved parents in a legal or financial matter.

- There is no respite during the emotional turmoil of our initial grief as bereaved parents. It is just when we are most vulnerable that we have to take care of necessary legal or financial matters, starting with the registering of our child's death, and continuing to much more, depending on the circumstances.
- At this time, some kindness from the person on the other side of the desk can make a big difference. It does not have to be complex; simply an acknowledgement of the pain of our loss, some tact, some sensitivity, and a lot of patience will be greatly appreciated.
- If you can, please try to make the process as easy as possible. As mentioned above, we may have difficulty concentrating or become overwhelmed by information. Giving us literature to read in our own time and inviting us to make notes during our appointments might be a good idea.
- Please be prepared to repeat information, on this occasion or at a later date. The shock of our child's death can cause some temporary short-term memory problems.

Ministers of Religion and Faith Leaders

- A caring presence is what our family needs most at this time, someone who is prepared to be beside us in our grief, who is not afraid of our emotions. We need you to listen, to help us talk about our child, to be with us in the dark. Some of us will want to pray, finding our faith a support and a sustenance, while others may feel estranged from God at this time.
- We do not need to be given 'solutions' to our pain, to be reassured with clichés like “She is in a better place”, “You can have more children”, “it was part of God’s plan”, and so on. Our children are not replaceable or interchangeable, and we need time to mourn the one we have lost.
- Our feelings about faith may have changed after such a devastating loss; we may feel more drawn to our religion than ever, or we may find ourselves questioning it. We need you to accept that we may feel angry with God. Sympathetic, prayerful and supportive silence can be as valuable as words at this time.
- The funeral arrangements will need to be made, and your knowledge and experience will be invaluable to us. You, as well as the funeral director, can help us make decisions about the practical matters, such as seeing our child’s body, or perhaps having them at home with us so that we can complete our caring for them until the funeral.
- Most of us would appreciate the funeral service being personalised for our child. This could include choosing music loved by our child, and friends and members of our family reading poems or giving the eulogy.
- If we are not accustomed to attending your place of worship, it would be helpful if you could explain what is and is not possible regarding the funeral. Even when we do not share the same faith, your pastoral support will usually be welcome.

See the TCF leaflet [Preparing your Child's Funeral](#) for helpful suggestions for parents. www.tcf.org.uk/preparingyourchildsfuneral

Other Roles

Please see the following TCF leaflets for other professional roles:

For school and college staff:

When a Pupil or Student Dies - www.tcf.org.uk/schools

For employers:

Helping a Bereaved Employee - www.tcf.org.uk/bereavedemployee

For funeral directors:

Funeral Directors and the Bereaved Parent -
www.tcf.org.uk/funeraldirectors

For police:

Police and Bereaved Parents - www.tcf.org.uk/police

Face-To-Face with Grief

Speaking with a bereaved parent is not likely to be a conversation that you are looking forward to, especially if you are not accustomed to this, and/or you knew the child who died.

As hard as it may be, it is usually better to say something than nothing, so please do not be afraid of saying the wrong thing. Try to avoid drawing back if we cry. Our tears are natural. Just offer us some tissues and give us some moments to collect ourselves.

Your own feelings are a part of your work. You can be professional without seeming detached or distant. If you know us well, or knew our child, we will feel supported when you acknowledge your own grief and sorrow at their death, even looking at photos with us.

Sometimes a bereavement will touch closely on your own experience of loss. It is not usually appropriate to talk about this with us, but you may want to find a source of support or a place where you can explore your emotions later.

Thank You

Thank you for taking your time to read this leaflet. We appreciate all you can do in supporting the bereaved parents who cross your path. We may not always be so forthcoming in showing our appreciation at the time, but in the years to come, we are likely to look back and remember with comfort the patience you showed. Your kindness gave us a safe space in which to cope with our grief and keep moving onwards with our lives.

This leaflet has been written for professionals and those in support roles who encounter bereaved parents. A leaflet with suggestions for family and friends can be found here:

www.tcf.org.uk/familyandfriends

Who are the Compassionate Friends?

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) is a charitable organisation of bereaved parents, siblings and grandparents dedicated to the support and care of other similarly bereaved family members who have suffered the death of a child or children of any age and from any cause.

We offer support, both directly to bereaved families, and indirectly by fostering understanding and good practice amongst professionals concerned with child death and by increasing public awareness.

In TCF, "family" covers a broad spectrum of relationships. We aim to help any individual or family affected by the death of a child, including unmarried partners, adoptive parents, step families, same sex couples and single parent families.

TCF has no religious affiliation and offers support to bereaved families irrespective of the age of the child, cause of death, ethnic, social or political background.



The Compassionate Friends

UK Helpline:

0345 123 2304

Northern Ireland Helpline:

0288 77 88 016

General Enquiries

0345 120 3785

E: info@tcf.org.uk

TCF Library

0345 120 3785

E: library@tcf.org.uk

To find out more about TCF visit

www.tcf.org.uk |  [@tcf.org.uk](https://www.facebook.com/tcf.org.uk)  [@TCFCharityUK](https://twitter.com/TCFCharityUK)

In loving memory of Jessica Argall.
Remembering her 29 years and a life
grounded in love, compassion, faith
and hope, all of which she shared freely.

Founder: The Revd Canon Dr Simon Stephens OBE

President: The Countess Mountbatten of Burma