



**Helping our grandchildren  
when our child has died**

A nationwide organisation of bereaved parents and their families



## HELPING OUR GRANDCHILDREN WHEN OUR CHILD HAS DIED

As bereaved parents, we share similar emotions of sorrow and loss, irrespective of the age at which our children died. There are, however, particular issues that face us when our adult son or daughter dies, leaving their own child or children. In these circumstances, we have not only our own grief to endure, but also that of their partners and children. We often wish that we could have died in our child's place, so that their family could have remained intact. This "survival guilt" is a very common feeling after any death, but especially so after one of our children has died. If we live nearby and are actively supporting the rest of the family, we will have fewer opportunities for our own grieving, and may have to remember to set aside time and space to mourn our child. If we live some distance away, we will have the continual anxiety of how the family is coping on a day-to-day basis. There is an overwhelming desire to make everything "all right", and the irreversibility of what has happened is hard to accept.

### **Caring for the grandchildren**

Many of us will have enjoyed a close, loving relationship with our adult child and his or her family. We will be able to comfort and support each other, and help with the practical problems which are created by the death of a child who is also a parent. Some of us take on much of the daily care of our grandchildren, either temporarily or for the long term. These children need exceptional understanding. This can be emotionally, mentally and even physically demanding for us when our own resources are strained by the death of our child. We may find that we draw strength from the support and understanding that we give to each other, and a special relationship can grow from our shared sorrow.

Children at whatever stage of their development will have many anxieties, and it is best to answer their questions as simply and honestly as possible. *The Compassionate Friends* (TCF) has leaflets and articles on children's grief and the differing ways that they perceive death as they grow

older. The TCF Postal Library has books about this, as well as books for children of all ages.

### Family relationships

In time, the partner of our son or daughter may start a new relationship. It may be painful for us to adjust to someone else taking our child's place within the family. Our grandchildren may experience difficulties relating to a step-parent; the changed circumstances may stir up their grief afresh, with thoughts like, "Why did my real Mum or Dad have to die?"

As time goes by, visits to grandparents may become fewer as the new family puts down roots, especially if more children are born, adding the involvement of a new set of grandparents. This development will be an additional reminder to us, accentuating the yearning for "what might have been". Sometimes we have put our grieving "on hold" while we are caring for our grandchildren. When a change occurs in the family, and we are less involved, our unresolved grief can surface and bring us problems.

### Staying in touch

We can keep in touch with our grandchildren by sending cards and gifts on birthdays and at Christmas and other religious festivals, and cards, letters, text messages and emails in between. We can talk to them on the telephone or set up a webcam link (especially useful if they live a long way away, or have moved to another country). In this way we can reassure them that our relationship with them is important. If contact with us has been discouraged, it is possible that when they become adult, they will want to investigate their roots and resume contact with us. Many bereaved parents make a memory book after the death of their child, which can include photographs, drawings, certificates, school reports, newspaper stories, a family tree etc. This will be of great interest to our grandchildren whose own memories of their parent, our son or daughter, will fade over the years.

### Difficult relationships

Sometimes the surviving partner feels that he or she can cope with their loss only by cutting themselves off from people and events connected to

their life together. This may not be a permanent situation, but can be hurtful for us if contact with our grandchildren is lost. This rejection is an added burden. Our dying child may have asked us to look after his or her children, and we find ourselves unable to fulfil these expectations.

If we have a poor relationship with our child's partner, we may find that access to our grandchildren is denied. Although grandparents can legally apply for contact through the court, it is advisable to explore every other avenue first.

## **Avoiding conflict**

Even in the best circumstances, involvement with the changed family situation will often need tact, especially if we feel that decisions are made that our dead child would not have liked. It is worth making great efforts to remain uncritical, so that all channels of communication are kept open.

We may feel bitter and angry if we sense that contact with our grandchildren is unnecessarily infrequent or denied. A good friend, who is willing to listen to our feelings of grief, hurt and frustration, is an invaluable asset, as we struggle to avoid arguments or confrontation.

## **Where can I go from here?**

The reading of this leaflet may be your first real contact with TCF. We hope that it has given you a little comfort, perhaps showing you that your pain and worries are shared by others. TCF publishes over thirty **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, you could ring our **Helpline** on **0345 1 23 23 04** 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**, who could visit if you wish, and give you the 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

can talk and meditate in peaceful surroundings. Most years there is an **Annual Gathering**, to which all members are invited.

TCF runs a website on **www.tcf.org.uk** which is increasingly popular. A quarterly journal, *Compassion*, is produced, containing articles and poems written by our members about their own experiences. Those who wish for further reading matter may borrow from our **Postal Library**, which can be contacted at:

**TCF Postal Library**

Tel: 0345 120 3785

Email: [library@tcf.org.uk](mailto:library@tcf.org.uk)

General enquiries and details of how to become a subscribing member and take part in our activities, may be directed to the **Office (the address of the office is located on the back page of this leaflet)**.

The Compassionate Friends is a registered charity (No 1082335); it is a company limited by guarantee, registered in England and Wales (No 04029535).

TCF

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**UK Helpline 0345 1 23 23 04**

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*This leaflet is sponsored by the Carnforth and District TCF in memory of all their beloved children and grandchildren.*

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