



The  
Compassionate  
Friends

## Helping Our Grandchildren When Our Child Has Died



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

# Helping Our Grandchildren When Our Child Has Died

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As bereaved parents, we share similar emotions of sorrow and loss, irrespective of the age at which our children died. However, we face particular issues 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.

**If we live nearby and are actively supporting the rest of the family, we might have fewer opportunities for our own grieving, and will need to set aside time and space to mourn our child. If we live some distance away, we will have the 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.**

## Supporting our grandchildren as they remember their parent

The tragic loss of our adult child will have changed us forever. A parent's grief can be quite overwhelming. 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. (For more on grief, see *The Compassionate Friend's (TCF) leaflet on Living with Grief.*)

At the same time, we will be painfully aware of the enormous impact that the death of their parent will have had on our grandchildren. They may have watched their parent suffer from an illness or there could have been a sudden death without

'goodbyes'. Depending on their age and developmental stage, they may or may not understand the permanence of death. You may like to read The Compassionate Friend's (TCF) leaflet on *Our Surviving Children* for more on this topic.

It is best to answer a child's questions as simply and honestly as possible. There are several organisations that provide a more detailed explanation about children's grief and the differing ways that they perceive and react to death as they grow older. See:

**Winston's Wish:** [www.winstonswish.org/supporting-you/supporting-a-bereaved-child](http://www.winstonswish.org/supporting-you/supporting-a-bereaved-child)

**Child Bereavement UK:** [www.childbereavementuk.org/for-families/support-for-bereaved-children](http://www.childbereavementuk.org/for-families/support-for-bereaved-children)

It is well accepted by grief support professionals that continuing a relationship of memory with the deceased is a healthy way of processing grief. This applies to children also, who benefit greatly when they are supported in remembering their parent.

There are so many ways that this can be done. A display board, memory book or box can include photographs, newspaper stories, a family tree, treasured items and so on. This will be of great interest to our grandchildren whose own memories of their parent - our son or daughter - will fade over the years. We can even work on creating these together. Something as simple as telling our grandchildren stories about when their mother or father was young can be very helpful for them, although we might not be ready to do this at the earliest time of our grief when we ourselves are feeling very emotional.

Another positive activity can be helping them to make cards for Mother's or Father's Day and the birthday of their deceased parent. We might also help them do the same for their surviving parent to help build the relationship between us all.

# Caring for our 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 issues that are created by the death of a child who is also a parent.

For some of us, this could involve taking on some of the daily care of our grandchildren, either temporarily or for the long term. Whilst we are glad to have this opportunity to support them at this difficult time, it can also be emotionally, mentally and even physically demanding for us when our own resources are strained by the death of our child. Yet 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.

If our adult child was a lone parent, or occasionally for other reasons, as grandparents we may find ourselves taking on the full responsibility for our grandchild or children. Suddenly we are faced with child rearing tasks that we thought we were already finished with. This can have an impact on our own health, energy or financial situation, and may simply be a very unexpected development, with consequences for our job or our retirement.

On the other hand, some of us may not be able to take on the responsibility of looking after grandchildren because of ill-health ourselves, the distance involved or having responsibilities elsewhere. We may have to recognise our limitations and that we are not able to do as much as we would like.

## Staying in touch

If our grandchildren are living at some distance from us, we can keep in touch by sending cards and gifts on birthdays and at Christmas and other religious festivals. Cards, letters, text messages and emails can be sent at any time. 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.

It would be helpful if we could learn to use social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter or other sites, as this can be a positive way of keeping in touch; we can 'chat' or have video link calls with each other.

## Family relationships

If our child had a partner, then our relationship with them will be ongoing to one extent or another. If he or she goes on to have a new relationship, possibly with other children involved, we may well find this very difficult. It would be good, where possible, to build a relationship with this newly enlarged 'blended' family.

This 'blended' family may eventually move away. We can help our grandchildren cope by being as positive about it as possible, reassuring them that we will keep in touch and visit when it can be arranged. Showing an interest in how they are doing at their new school and in their new home can help to maintain the relationship.

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 might accentuate our yearning for 'what might have been'.

We might have put our own grieving on hold to some degree whilst we were first supporting our grandchildren. When a change occurs in the family and we are less involved, our unresolved grief can surface.

## Difficult relationships

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

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. It can also be frustrating, especially if our dying child asked us to look after his or her children, and we find ourselves unable to fulfil these expectations.

Sometimes the surviving parent puts up barriers between us and our grandchildren. This may happen whether or not they have a new partner. There can be many reasons for them denying us access to our grandchildren, but if we are not allowed to be involved in our grandchild's life this will probably be very upsetting for us as well as for them.

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 can be an invaluable asset, as we struggle to avoid arguments or confrontation.

Although we have no statutory legal rights as grandparents, it is possible to apply for a contact order through the courts. However, this would be a last resort, and it would be better for all concerned if we were somehow able to reconcile with our child's surviving partner.

If contact with us has been discouraged, it is possible that when our grandchildren are older, they will want to investigate their roots and resume contact with us.

## Going forward

The death of our child was a tragedy that has changed our life forever, and this is true for our grandchildren too, as they have lost their parent. Whilst we are navigating and coping with our own grief, our grandchildren need our support, and that can be a challenge for us. We will do the best we can, and that is all we can do. Together we will love, honour and remember their parent, who was our son or our daughter.

As the years pass, we may see glimpses of our much-loved son or daughter in the children they left behind. Mannerisms and physical characteristics may be bittersweet reminders, but watching our grandchildren grow and live their own lives will also bring us joy.

# 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](http://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  
**Compassionate  
Friends**

UK Helpline:

**0345 123 2304**

Northern Ireland Helpline:

0288 77 88 016

**General Enquiries**

0345 120 3785

E: [info@tcf.org.uk](mailto:info@tcf.org.uk)

**TCF Library**

0345 120 3785

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

**[www.tcf.org.uk](http://www.tcf.org.uk)**

This leaflet has been sponsored in loving memory of our darling, beautiful granddaughter Emily Bella Annie Weiss who is forever in our thoughts.

**Founder: The Revd Canon Dr Simon Stephens OBE**

**President: The Countess Mountbatten of Burma**