



Our children's friends

A nationwide organisation of bereaved parents and their families



OUR CHILDREN'S FRIENDS

When our child dies, we are often bound together as a family unit in a tight ball of grief which friends, neighbours and colleagues can find hard to penetrate, however much they want to help. In the confusion and shock of the days that follow the death of our child, it can be very difficult for us as newly bereaved parents to reach out to anyone outside the immediate family group. It can be especially hard for our children's friends to find a way of sharing their grief with the family. Yet we are all mourning the same person, even if we knew them in different ways and contexts. Sometimes we do not know these friends before the death of our child, but we may find we can support and help each other in unexpected ways. When our children's friends are able to make themselves known to us, they are often a source of strength rather than a burden. These new relationships can be full of love, warmth and enrichment, even in a time of acute grief and pain.

The death of a son or daughter involves us in an extended circle of grief, with our family at its centre. Spreading out from this focal point might be our own friends and their families. Many of our children would have been old enough to have made friends of their own. Depending on the age at which our child died, there could be playmates, school or college friends, boyfriends, girlfriends or work colleagues.

This may be the first time that these young people have been presented with their own vulnerability to accident, injury or illness, now brought home to them in a very painful way, through the death of their friend. Any bond between the family and these friends can become profoundly comforting for both sides and a precious link with the person we all love and miss so much.

The help that we can give and receive depends, to some extent, both on the age at which our child died, and on the different ages of the friends who now miss them. For young children bereaved by the death of a friend, the loss will be that of a playmate or a companion, someone with whom they shared things, toys and games, times at playgroup or nursery, occasions when families celebrated birthdays or holidays together. Perhaps they got together for Christmas or other religious celebrations. Often these young friends will be known to us; they will live in the same street, have played in our garden, come to tea in our house, or stayed overnight. Their loss will be of shared places, as well as the

friend they knew. We can help them by continuing to welcome them into our home, letting them play in our garden or have a drink in our kitchen. Being able still to play with favourite toys, or see a much loved pet, can help a young child to hold on to the memory of their friend, and ease the sudden gap that they feel but are unable to express in words. Their need for this contact will diminish over time, and we should not be surprised at this, but at least in the early days of bereavement it can help us all to recognise that there is continuity.

We often try to protect very young children from our mourning: they may not have been allowed to come to the funeral and there may be little mention of their dead friend in their home or at school. Our house may be one of the few places where their friend is still real to them. There can be a well meant but misplaced wish not to 'upset' young children, to think that they soon forget. Schools and playgroups can be insensitively speedy in removing a name from a register or coat peg. It can be very disconcerting for a child to feel as if their friend had never existed. Would they, too, be forgotten and not mentioned if the same thing happened to them? There is a fine line between ignoring the impact of the tragedy and helping them to move on into the future. It is true that they will make new friends, laugh and play football with someone else, but that does not mean they are not also missing their friend. If we can show that we too feel hurt and are sad, that it is OK to cry, that in time we can look at photographs and share memories, then we are helping them to cope with other bereavements later on.

We should not, in our thoughts on this subject, forget families who have lost a baby through miscarriage, stillbirth or neonatal death. Where there are other children, and they have friends, we need to keep alive the reality that there was a child and that he or she remains part of the family, even though there may be few memories to share. It is perhaps worth considering too, when one of our children dies, that the friends of their brothers or sisters may want to join in the support of the family or, indeed, need support themselves.

As our children grow into teenage years and beyond, their friendships tend to become more private and so we may know their friends less well. This can make it more difficult to help them in their grief, but there can also be a real joy in getting to know our child's best friend and understanding what it was that first drew them together, why they became friends. Often we recognise in this friend the qualities we loved in our child, the same sense of fun or gentleness or love of sport. These very characteristics help us to feel closer to our son or daughter who has died.

Hopefully, our son or daughter's friends will have felt welcomed at the funeral and may have been able to contribute in some way, with words, music, and memories, or ideas for a memorial to their friend. However, we need to be aware that help, friendship and support can only be offered and received as and when they are wanted. Friends may be more comfortable visiting in a group, especially if we show our awareness of their need for privacy by not asking too many questions. Sometimes a special friend needs not our company, but a chance to be alone, perhaps to be still and quiet in our child's room to remember and to grieve. Sometimes our own anguish and fears make us limit the opportunities which are available, but it is worth taking risks, for young people can show reserves of strength and love which amaze us. The presence of young friends can give to our close family circle an extra dimension, a ring of support and protection which can diminish that dreadful sense of isolation which threatens to overwhelm us.

Schools vary enormously in their ability to support classmates and friends when a child dies; experiences may even differ from class to class as so much depends on the individual key adults. A teacher who has never experienced the death of a loved one, or who has memories locked away which they find too painful to acknowledge, may find it hard to help. If we, as the parents of the dead child, express our willingness to help and show our concern for our child's friends, then it may encourage the school to do more. We cannot protect the survivors from the pain but we may be able to be a channel of communication. If the school is planning a memorial, we can suggest that our child's friends are involved so that it becomes an expression of shared affection, not a formal commemoration organised by those in authority.

As time passes, we can continue to welcome visits and to talk. However, for some young friends the pain of an immediate return to a house still echoing with happy memories may be too much to cope with. We need to show gentle understanding and awareness of their difficulties, and perhaps devise an imaginative way for them to 're-enter' their friend's home when the time is right for them. The special friend may continue to need a quiet refuge. As with younger children, possessions can be a way of keeping the sharing alive, as can photos and letters. Many families have found that friends write "to give sorrow words"; some have actively encouraged this. One mother has a jam jar at her son's grave, a safe, dry place where friends can leave poems and messages, knowing they will be read and appreciated by others. We should not underestimate the mutual benefits that all these forms of sharing can bring. Where there is a group

of friends, they may be able to support each other and so need us less. But they may still welcome an invitation at special anniversaries, both as a recognition of the value we place on their support, and as a way of continuing to remember and to honour their dead friend.

Adult sons and daughters who have left the family home and lived in their own separate world of college or work, maybe even in a different country and with a different culture, will have friends who are unknown to us. We may have heard of them in letters or phone conversations, but never met them until death brings us together. They too have gifts for us, if we can accept them, and they can draw comfort from feeling welcomed by their friend's family. Sometimes they are surrounded by a group of people who also knew and loved their dead friend, and they can support each other; they may come to the funeral together, perhaps contributing words or music or acting as coffin bearers.

For other friends, the road is more lonely. They may have no one near them who knew what their friend meant to them, no one with whom to share their grief. We choose our friends, they share our thoughts and we experience good and bad times together. If we have been friends for many years, then they are a part of our memories and our shared past, perhaps uniquely so. When close and long-established friends die, even our past can seem changed as well as the future in which we had, perhaps, hoped to maintain our contact and friendship. To lose a best friend is to lose a part of oneself. To feel welcomed and embraced by the surviving family can, in a small way, ease this loneliness and isolation. Just as we recognise the qualities in our child's friends that we loved and valued in our child, so they may feel a sense of recognition in seeing their dead friend within a family context; physical characteristics, a certain sense of humour or tone of voice are often shared by other family members and these can be a comfort. Many TCF members have written about the warmth and love they experienced from their children's friends in the early weeks and months after their son or daughter's death.

In the long term life moves on; some of these friends become an ongoing part of our lives, while others do not. Where contact is maintained, whatever age our child was when he or she died, there is both joy and pain in seeing their friends living their lives, responding to the challenges and experiences that our child did not live to face and hopefully enjoy, the 'lost milestones' of first jobs, loving relationships, marriage, children and so on. Our continuing involvement in the life of a someone who was close to our child can, in an un-

expected way, help to carry him or her with us as the years pass, rather than 'leaving them behind', something many of us fear will happen. It has brought much comfort to some parents in TCF when friends of our child have named one of their own children after our son or daughter. Sometimes there are difficult choices to be made, times when we feel we should draw back, however much we might like to be there with them. We might receive invitations to the wedding of a previous partner of our dead son or daughter, but some of us may feel that our presence might cast a shadow; while for others it is right to be part of such a joyful day. For childless parents, these times are an agonising reminder of a future lost, yet some take comfort from the continued presence of their son or daughter's friends.

For some of us, these loving and supportive contacts will be lifelong. However long they last, they can enrich our lives, deepen our awareness of our lost child, and be a source of strength and comfort in the loss that we all share.

A little girl came home from a neighbour's house where her friend had died.

"Why did you go?" asked her father.

"To comfort her mother," replied the child.

"What could you do to comfort her?"

"I climbed into her lap and cried with her."

Further information may be obtained from

The Compassionate Friends

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In memory of our children.

Founder: The Rev. Dr Simon Stephens OBE RN

President: The Countess Mountbatten of Burma

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