



The  
Compassionate  
Friends

## Our Child's Friends

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

# Our Child's Friends

---

The tragic death of a son or daughter involves us in an extended circle of grief. Unless our child was an infant, he or she will have been old enough to have friends of their own. There could be playmates, best friends, school friends, or even boy or girl friends. When our child dies, it is natural that our primary concern is for our immediate family members, including siblings, and other close loved ones.

**However, once the initial confusion and shock has passed, we may summon the strength to consider this circle of friends who are also affected by the death of our child. Finding ways to respond to them, and even include them in our mourning, takes an effort on our part but may be mutually beneficial. We may also discover that the parents of our child's friends are looking to us for a lead.**

(In this leaflet we are looking at the friends of our child of any age, up to and including teenagers. The Compassionate Friends (TCF) has also published a leaflet on *Our Adult Child's Friends and Partner*.)

## Understanding and reacting to death

A child's understanding of death develops as they grow, and our awareness of this can help us all as we navigate the difficult road of grief. There can be variation; sometimes young children may have a mature understanding of death for their age, whereas a child who has had a sheltered

life or one who has never experienced loss may have less understanding. Generally, most children react to death according to their developmental stages.

See [www.cruse.org.uk/Children/children-understanding-death](http://www.cruse.org.uk/Children/children-understanding-death) for more on this.

## Children

Often our child's 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. For children bereaved by the death of a friend, the loss will be that of a playmate or a companion, someone with whom they first shared toys and games at playgroup or nursery. There will have been shared occasions when families celebrated birthdays or holidays, Christmas or other religious celebrations together. Our house may be one of the few places where their friend is still real to them.

If they are young children, they are unlikely to understand death as something permanent. They will probably have a lot of questions, such as: "When is Amy coming back?", "Will I see Harry tomorrow?" At this age, they will swing back and forth from feeling sad to happily playing with their toys as though nothing has happened. This does not mean they are not grieving, but it is simply natural at this age to have a short attention span.

Older children are likely to have a better understanding of the fact that death is final. They may have already experienced a death in their own family or of a pet. Older children are likely to be interested in the funeral or cremation ceremony, and have questions about how it will work. They may ask questions about how their friend died or other details; the bluntness of their enquiries can take us back. It can be helpful to reflect that any insensitive probing is due to their immaturity, not thoughtlessness.

It is up to the parents of our child's friends as to exactly how the death is presented or explained to them. Some parents may wish to protect their children from our mourning: they may not allow them to come to the funeral and there may be little mention of their dead friend in their home or at school. Others may be more open, and want their child to understand and be involved.

If this is what their parents wish, we can help our child's friends 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 fade over time, and we should not be surprised at this.

## Teenagers

As children reach their teenage years, they experience significant changes in their emotional and physical development. They might be in denial over what has happened. This is often a method of self-protection, something we as adults may also experience. The pain of grief can also cause them anxiety and loss of self-confidence. Behavioural problems are not unusual. More seriously, if our child used to self-harm and/or died from suicide, teenage friends can sometimes engage in copycat activities. Hopefully the parents of these teenagers will be aware and alert to these reactions, and be able to support their child.

Conversely, it is also possible that the parents may not know that someone in their child's circle has died. Teenagers tend to keep their friendships more private and parents may not know who their closest friends are, even if their wider circle of school friends, neighbours, and others are known.

Teenagers may also prefer to be private when they try to cope with grief. It can be helpful to be aware of the various support organisations that we could suggest to them or their parents which could provide them a neutral place to share their feelings, or to be able to communicate with other young bereaved people. For example, the website Hope Again has an online message board where young bereaved people can communicate. Grief Encounter is another example; this charity offers a variety of support for young bereaved people, including e-counselling sessions. See [www.hopeagain.org.uk](http://www.hopeagain.org.uk) and [www.griefencounter.org.uk](http://www.griefencounter.org.uk)

As we sort through our child's belongings, it is possible that we may discover aspects of our teenage child's friendships that disturb us. If so, it is usually best to keep our criticisms to ourselves; it will not help any of us to express our disapproval to his or her friends, although informing their parents may be a different matter. If there is any behaviour or activities we feel they should be made aware of, such as behaviours that might result in harm to themselves or other people, it should be shared in a calm and objective way.

More often than not, however, there can be a real joy in maintaining contact with our child's teenage friends, if this is what they wish. Often we recognise in their friends the qualities we loved in our child - the same sense of fun or musical tastes or love of sport. These very characteristics may help us to feel closer to our child who has died, although it can also be a painful reminder of our loss. These friends may also appreciate staying in touch as a sign of the value placed on their friendship with our son or daughter.

## Our child's funeral

With the prior support of their parents, inviting our child's friends to the funeral and even involving them in some way can be helpful for them. They might choose songs, or write and read a poem. This can be an important part of their process of grief. Still, we should not feel obliged to do this; the funeral of our child is one of the most difficult occasions we will ever have to cope with, and the wishes of ourselves and our immediate family must come first.

## Visits and memories

The continued presence of our child's friends can give our close family circle an extra dimension, a ring of support and protection that can diminish the terrible sense of isolation which threatens to overwhelm us. Young people can demonstrate reserves of strength and love that amaze us.

However, for some young friends the pain of an early 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 not necessarily expect them to continue visiting. We should also be aware that sometimes a special friend does not need our company as much as a chance to be alone, perhaps to be still and quiet in our child's room, to remember and to grieve.

Possessions, including photographs and letters, may be shared if we wish. Many families have found that friends write "to give sorrow words"; some have actively encouraged this. A memory book or memory box can be useful. For instance, some place a jar at their child's grave, providing a safe, dry place where friends can leave poems and messages, knowing they will be read and appreciated by others.

Significant days such as Christmas, or our child's birthday or death anniversary, can be particularly painful not only for ourselves, but also for our child's friends. Depending on the level of contact we are still having with them at the time, we may or may not wish to invite them to any ceremony or commemoration we hold. It is important nonetheless that we do not make them feel there are things they must do. It may be best to have an attitude of "our door is always open if you feel the need to visit."

## Social media

Whatever the age of our child's friends (except for the very youngest children), we need to be aware of the impact of social media and mobile connectivity.

It is worth bearing in mind that we cannot always protect children from finding out details of the death of their friend through sources other than their loved ones or ourselves. There is always a chance they may hear rumours in a school playground, overhear conversations or read something on social media. This increasingly applies to children even as young as eight.

This is particularly in the case of deaths by accident, crime or suicide, which may have received media coverage. One thing we can do is give our own account of what has happened or our understanding of what has happened. It is important to dispel rumours, especially if news articles or social media posts have provided distorted accounts or written about our child in a way with which we are uncomfortable. This could be through sharing our own social media post, or sending out an email to multiple people.

Social media can also be helpful as our child's friends learn to live with their loss. For example, we could create an

online memorial where friends can leave tributes. This could be through a Facebook page where people can leave comments or share photos. Another option might be to create a Just Giving page, where friends could be invited to make donations or fund-raise for a cause that was important to our child.

Using the digital world as a means of remembering can have its advantages and disadvantages. It may not be for all of us, but with careful thought and used in the right way, it can bring something extremely positive to our child's friends and to ourselves.

See the TCF Leaflet *Our Child's Digital Legacy* for more information about the role of social media when remembering our child.

## Our child's school or college

If our child was at school, their death may have had a big impact on their fellow pupils or students. If we feel able, getting in touch with our child's year teacher or tutor could be helpful.

Schools vary enormously in their ability to support classmates and friends when a child dies; experiences may even differ from class to class. A teacher who has never experienced the death of a loved one, or who has memories locked away which they find too painful to deal with, may find it hard to help either us or our child's school friends. Schools and playgroups can sometimes be too quick to remove 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.

If we, as the parents of the deceased child, express our willingness to help and show our concern for our child's friends, then it may encourage the school to do more. If the



school is planning a memorial, we can suggest that our child's friends are involved so the event helps them personally to grieve.

We might want to give the school a copy of the TCF leaflet *When a Student Dies*.

## As time goes by

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."*

By helping others we can help ourselves. We can benefit from helping our child's friends; we can even be comforted by them. Still, it is also important to recognise our limitations. Sometimes there are difficult choices to be made, times when we feel we should draw back, however much we might like to be there. Watching a sports match when our child used to be part of the team, playing music or a video game they particularly loved, attending a birthday party; - we can all think of occasions like these when the reality of our child's absence causes us immense pain. We should not feel obliged to continue taking part in events that are difficult to bear.

Although it is likely to hurt, we should also be aware that our child's friends will continue on with their lives. In time, the gaps that were left by our child will be filled by other friends, other teammates.

## The road ahead

To lose a 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 such 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. It has brought much comfort to some parents when friends of their child have even chosen to name one of their own children after their son or daughter.

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 pain and joy 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. Yet our continuing involvement in the life of someone who was close to our child can, in unexpected ways, help to carry him or her with us as the years pass.

# 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)**

The printing of this leaflet is sponsored by  
The Catharine Pointer Memorial Library.

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