



When our child has been Murdered

A nationwide organisation of bereaved parents and their families



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WHEN OUR CHILD HAS BEEN MURDERED

Introduction

The shock of learning that someone has killed your child must be one of the most extreme traumas that a parent can face. Every parent who has been confronted with the sudden death of a son or daughter, at whatever age, knows the shock. Our whole family's existence, life itself, is changed for ever in an instant, as the words are spoken. Sometimes the shock protects us from reality for a while; we seem to be watching the tragedy unfold through the wrong end of a telescope, this dreadful news is not about us, not about our family. But it is.

For the parents who are told their child has been murdered, there is so much to confront, because murder is always:

SUDDEN - there is no preparation for this moment

VIOLENT - someone has destroyed the life of your child in
an act of violence

DELIBERATE - someone has intentionally committed this
deed.

Bringing the news

For most people, the police are the bearers of the terrible news, and they usually arrive unannounced at the door. There is no easy way to give or receive such news, but the manner in which it is brought is important. There is a need for clear information, stated in a compassionate way and in everyday language. When people are in shock, they may not take in what is being said to them, so repetition is important, as is the opportunity to ask questions. For this reason, it also helps if the police leave contact details in writing. In the best police practice, the family is assigned a Family Liaison Officer (FLO) whose job it is to keep us regularly informed.

The police may not have all the information we need; they may not be able to tell us how, or even when, our child died, whether death was quick, whether the child knew what was happening, whether they suffered, whether they knew the murderer, if indeed it was murder. Even at this early stage, the police must focus on identifying the offender.

Missing children

A different set of circumstances arises when your child is missing but no body is found. There is still hope that s/he is alive and well. This hope may be abruptly shattered by the discovery of the body – or indeed, the body may never be found. Both uncertainty and knowledge are terrible in their different ways.

Immediate practicalities

There is a desperate need to tell the rest of the family, yet we may be in such a state of shock that clear thinking is impossible. The police usually try to make sure that someone, maybe a close friend, can be with us to begin the necessary telephone calls and communications. Murder creates an added urgency. There are two pressing needs: to tell family and close friends before they hear it through the media, and for the police to begin their investigations as quickly as possible. The death becomes public property as soon as it is defined as murder, and the family has no control over what information is released. It can be very difficult to reach all those extended family members and close friends we would wish to tell before the news is made public. The presence of the media, whether we feel this to be intrusive or helpful, is an added burden.

There is a further complication if the murder has been committed in or around the family home. The police investigation will demand that the home is sealed to protect the evidence, and there can be no access. Thus, at this most crucial time, we could be deprived of our familiar base - and may also be separated from vital possessions, such as clothes, money, address books, photographs etc. Later, there can also be emotional and practical problems in reopening and re-taking possession of the place in which our child has been killed.

Murder abroad

Circumstances are even more complicated if a son or daughter is murdered in another country. We may be left feeling powerless and out of control, and it will be necessary to deal with that country's legal system as well as with problems of language and communication. In some countries, burial or cremation must be completed with great swiftness. Even while in the first numbness, we may need to act very quickly if we wish to bring our child's body home, or if we want an independent post-mortem. The cost of travel, of translating documents and of obtaining local legal advice may prevent us from doing all that we would wish. Later, if a trial is held abroad, misunderstandings can easily arise; it can be very hard to follow the proceedings and to understand what is happening and why. In some countries Victim Support can help; we can ask the national Victim Support officer in this country for information, as well as the Foreign Office here and the British Embassy in the country where our child was killed. The Compas-

sionate Friend's leaflet Death abroad can be helpful here. To a lesser extent, but important nonetheless, we must remember that proceedings and laws that apply in England and Wales are not always the same in other parts of the UK (See footnotes on p6)

Surviving children

When a murder occurs, normality ceases. It is not possible to protect our surviving children from this; they will be affected. The aim should be to tell younger children enough to satisfy their questions at the time, to reassure them of our love for them, to tell them that we understand their feelings of fear and that the police are trying hard to catch the person responsible. While we will not want to burden them with terrible details, it is better that they hear the facts from us rather than in the playground. Parents do need to be honest, not to have secrets or pretend; even very young children know when the adults they love are distraught and it is usually better to be open about feelings. It is hard enough to be a child at such a time, without the added worry of thinking, "What are they not telling me?" Hugs and tears, and being physically close, will allow a child to grieve and feel a part of the family, sharing in its grief.

Older brothers and sisters may find it almost impossible to share their thoughts and emotions with their parents. The overwhelming sense that the family unit has been destroyed, that the murderer has horrifically changed their lives, that they feel unable to help their parents - all these thoughts can cause great silences and rifts. Just when we most need to help each other, we can feel that we are pushed far apart. The support of friends can be invaluable.

Caring for our child's body

An essential part of parenting is the physical care of our child's body and its needs; even when a son or daughter is an adult, the memory of such nurture is a powerful force. After murder our child's body becomes the property of the State for a while rather than the family. Many families suffer intense pain and anger at being prevented from caring and making proper arrangements for the body of a son or daughter.

It is essential that someone identifies the body; this can be a most difficult and painful hurdle to overcome, especially where there has been visible injury. Yet, if the injuries are carefully explained, the reality can be less distressing than the imaginings. The body will usually be seen at the mortuary and

arrangements will vary. We do have the right to see our child, although it may not be possible to touch the body. Many families wish to see their child more than once and most mortuaries understand, especially if there is likely to be a long delay in releasing the body into the care of a funeral director. Before seeing our child, it is important that all the circumstances are explained clearly to us and to any other family members or friends who visit, so that everyone is prepared to some extent.

Where can we find support?

The FLO from our local Police Service should give us a Home Office Pack called Information for the families of homicide victims and draw attention to important information within it (*Footnote 1) It can be hard to remember that the prime focus of police attention is catching the murderer, whereas ours is the death of our child. Police training does not always prepare officers adequately for the emotional issues particular to parents, that arise when a son or daughter has been murdered. It may be a good idea to seek help from other agencies, both professional and support groups, such as Support After Murder and Manslaughter (SAMM) or Victim Support.

The Victim Support Service offers trained volunteers who may be experienced in helping families through the aftermath of murder. Our assigned FLO may be able to put us in touch with such a person. These volunteers may help with the practical issues and accompany us on some essential visits. They can also act as intermediaries with the police, the coroner (*Footnote 2), mortuary officials, and other agencies, if we wish them to do so. When such trained volunteers are available, and the family has felt able to accept their help, the support may continue through the later events, including support at the trial. The Crown Court Witness Service can also be of great help

*1 – The Scottish Executive produce a pack called What to do after a death in Scotland, and the Northern Ireland Office’s version is called Towards healing. Both of these booklets are obtainable online from their websites.

*2 –In Scotland this job is undertaken by the Procurator Fiscal. We apologise that in our notes, we do not always identify the different laws and customs. Please be aware of this as you read our leaflet.

The media

The media will usually be interested in a murder. They see it as a gripping human-interest story and will want to exploit it to the full. The police press officer may be able to help and advise the family in their contacts with the media, as may the Victim Support volunteer. The experience of families bereaved by murder suggests that it is a good idea to give the media a brief statement, together with a photograph of our child, so that accurate information is used. We can then ask them to respect the need for privacy in our grief. There is good and bad in everyone, including journalists, so caution is advisable. It is often helpful to ask a friend to answer the phone or the door at this time. The media, as well as the public, have the right to attend both the inquest and the trial, and the family needs to be prepared for that.

Who killed my child?

The key question for most parents is “Who did this, who killed my child?” It is a dreadful truth that many murders are committed by a close family member or a person already known to the victim. If the family does not know the person, then there is the added question “Why did this person choose my child?” At first, the murderer’s identity may be unknown and people will react to this uncertainty in different ways. Some are consumed by a desire to know, as if their rage and grief will possibly be assuaged when they have someone to blame, when someone is caught. Other members of the family may feel they do not wish to know; they want to concentrate on grieving for the one who has died without the distraction of knowing, at least initially, who the murderer is.

However, the investigation will take its course and it is outside our control. When the police have sufficient evidence, they will arrest someone; that person will be brought to trial and may be found guilty or not.

Reactions to the murderer can divide an already vulnerable family; it can be agonising to see loved ones consumed with hatred and the desire for vengeance, especially if these feelings are not shared by everyone. Equally, the absence of displayed anger may be deeply perplexing to those who are raging about the person who has committed this terrible act.

Thinking about the murderer can also bring feelings of guilt into sharp focus; we may feel that if only our child had not visited the park, gone out that evening, worked in that particular place, or been so ‘free’ in their use of the Internet, they would still be alive. The desire to ‘re-run the tape’ can be overpowering. There can be an irrational but very real feeling that we have failed to protect

our child. This feeling needs to be shared with someone who is able to listen in an accepting way, rather than someone who will try to disprove it. This can be an area where counselling can be helpful because those closest to us may find that our guilt feelings are not only misplaced but also unbearably painful; a little distance and neutrality can help.

The post-mortem

Immediately after the death, the police will report to the Coroner who will arrange for the body of our son or daughter to be taken to the mortuary and for a pathologist to carry out a post-mortem to find out the cause of death. We, as parents, have the right to ask for an independent post-mortem or for a copy of the pathologist's report; we can ask for it to be sent to our GP so that s/he can go through it with us and explain the details. It might be sensible to ask about the possible cost of both. An added complication in death through murder is that each defendant has the right to ask for a separate post-mortem and this can delay the release of the body for the funeral. These procedures are different, of course, if our child was married, and we no longer act as next-of-kin.

The inquest

The Coroner will open the inquest as soon as possible after the post-mortem. The inquest is an inquiry, conducted by a coroner, to establish the facts of the identity of the dead person and when, where and how the death occurred. The inquest is not concerned with who caused the death, or the motivation that might have prompted it, because these issues will be investigated at the trial later.

It will be necessary for someone to have identified the body and for that person to make a statement on oath; this can be presented in writing at the inquest. Once the cause of death and the current state of the police investigation are reported, the inquest will be adjourned, while the criminal investigation continues. It will not be formally closed until after the trial. If no one is charged with the murder, then an inquest hearing will take place. Throughout these procedures, the family should be kept informed. We have the right to instruct a solicitor both to ask questions on our behalf and to request that particular witnesses are called. It is the Coroner who conducts these hearings and decides who should give evidence. After the initial inquest has established the cause of death, an interim death certificate can be given, although a formal death certificate will not be issued until the inquest is completed after the trial.

The Coroner will release the body only when s/he is satisfied that the defence has had the opportunity to ask for a post-mortem. This can lead to a very long

delay, especially if the police inquiry is lengthy, or if no one is charged. It causes great distress to family and friends when the funeral is delayed for weeks, or even months. During this time, the body is the responsibility of the Coroner, and only when s/he gives permission can our dead son or daughter be removed to a chapel of rest. Even if it seems that the case might never come to court, the police investigation will not be officially closed, but the body will ultimately be released for a funeral.

There are a number of detailed leaflets in the Home Office pack, which may be helpful. TCF also has leaflets on relevant matters including Death abroad. The death of a child and the legal system by TCF member Graeme Peart is a special publication available through the Bristol office.

The funeral

If there is a long delay, there can be a feeling that all living is suspended, and that grieving is impeded, until the body of our son or daughter is released for burial. But there will have been time to reflect and plan for the funeral, to make it the tribute and farewell that our child deserves. TCF's leaflet Preparing our child's funeral suggests how we might achieve this. It is important to take control of the public aspects of the funeral. We may want a small private ceremony, or wish it to be an occasion when our local community can join family and friends in saying farewell. The media should respect our choice, but we need to make that choice known, so that this important day is not marred by unwanted intrusions.

What happens next?

Up to this point, the funeral has been the focus of attention, and there may now seem to be a withdrawal of interest and concern. There are some practical matters to attend to but the central issue remains unresolved. Contact with the police may be infrequent at this time if they have nothing to report; indeed, we may almost be made to feel that our legitimate enquiries are a nuisance ("We'll tell you when we have some news"). We could ask our Victim Support volunteer to liaise with the police on our behalf, and meet with us on a regular basis. When a suspect is arrested the police should inform us directly, and continue to give updates on court hearings, changes of plea, applications for bail etc. If the Victim Support volunteer has had experience of court procedures, s/he can be invaluable in these matters.

The trial

When the case at last comes to court, there can be a feeling of relief, even though the wounds of grief are reopened. The family will have to make decisions and choices about who, if any one, attends court: trials can be long and at a distance from home, so there may also be financial worries. Careful preparations can do something to mitigate the ordeal. It is helpful to visit the courtroom before the trial begins, and to know whether some seating is set aside for the family (not least so that we are not forced to sit beside the relatives or friends of the accused). Hopefully, we will have been told if new information is to be disclosed or if the defendant has changed his or her plea. The pathologist's report on the post-mortem will include detailed description of the injuries to our child, for which we need to be prepared.

Once the legal proceedings begin, the role of the police changes. During the investigation, the police have been in charge. When the case comes to court, it is the judge and the lawyers who are in control. The lawyers are there to prosecute or defend and this can seem to lead to manipulation and distortion, with no possibility of comeback from the victim's family. As parents, we can feel that we are representing our child in court, that we must be strong for them; but unless we are called as witnesses, we have no voice. We may well be distressed by how little our child is spoken of as a person during the trial, by how technical and legal the proceedings are, and by the intrusive presence of the media and general public in court. If the accused enters a guilty plea, the proceedings can be very short, and this can, at best be un-nerving to a family prepared for a longer procedure.

The verdict and the sentence may bring yet more pain. A 'Not Guilty' verdict leaves the whole question unresolved: is the jury mistaken, or did someone else kill our child? Judgement following a guilty verdict may generate feelings that the sentence is inadequate, that the murderer will be free to carry on with normal life before s/he has been properly punished. For others, whether family or friends, there will be feelings of intense relief that the decision has been made. If the defendant is convicted of murder, the sentence will automatically be 'life'. However, the length of sentence to be served will not be announced at the trial. The judge considers the whole case and makes a recommendation to the Home Secretary. We may not be informed officially of the 'tariff' (the time to be spent in prison) although it will be possible to find out.

The attention of the media will immediately focus on the family's reaction to the verdict and sentence, and again, help can be available in the form of a prepared statement, perhaps read out by a lawyer.

The aftermath

As bereaved parents, we now have to live with the loss of a son or daughter. We, and the rest of our family, must also learn to live with the outcome of the trial, the length of sentence, parole, remission, the possible continued presence of the murderer's family within our community. How will we feel when our child's killer is released, perhaps to return to his or her nearby home? How will we feel when the press, local or national, report the release of the murderer from prison?

In the short term, many families suffer great emotional stress immediately after the ending of the court case and have much need of supportive friends. Many emotions may have been suppressed during the trial and these can re-surface in an overwhelming torrent of pent-up grief and rage.

The police are now free to return our child's possessions, which have been held as evidence. If this is handled insensitively, further distress can be caused. It is very painful suddenly to hold those things that our child had with them when they died, and it can help to be with a friend or Victim Support volunteer for the handing over, when it can be done in a private place. With their work now complete, the police inevitably move on to other cases and this too can leave families feeling isolated, ignored and rejected.

Feelings and emotions

In the long term, family members must find their own methods of adapting to what has happened, living with what cannot be changed, and of working through the pain and grief so that life can continue - albeit in a different way from how we would have wished. We can only make this 'journey' at our own pace.

Many people bereaved by murder experience great difficulties when they try to resume their normal activities. Life seems meaningless and empty, things that before brought pleasure are now without attraction and even laughter brings a feeling of guilt. Friends may find it hard to accept the fact that we have changed and that these changes might persist for years after the murder; they wonder if we will ever live normally again

The traumatic and savage circumstances surrounding murder will inevitably create unbearable waves of emotion. As shock and numbness wear off, we may wonder how it is possible to survive such extremes of anger, grief, rage, depression, guilt and sorrow. Some of us in our sorrow and devastation talk and weep to the extent that we worry or indeed exhaust those around us; others choose to keep our ideas and fears to ourselves, keeping thoughts private even from

those closest to us. We may suffer from frightening physical symptoms such as palpitations, nausea, insomnia, and very specific physical pain; we may need our doctor to reassure us that these are symptoms of grief. Panic attacks are a common reaction in the families of murder victims, stemming from the understandable idea that the world is suddenly a crazy, hostile place where unthinkable things occur without warning or reason. Depression is also common, resulting in feelings of isolation and despair.

Though not everyone does so, it is probably natural to regard the person who killed our son or daughter with hostility, anger and hatred. These feelings may focus on the person accused, then charged and finally convicted, but they can also be directed at the police, the law, other family members, or even against ourselves. If these intense negative emotions, along with desires for revenge, are not confronted, they can become buried in a way that will be damaging and may lead to later problems. Professional help, or the support of others who have been through a similar tragedy, can help us through these terrible feelings.

Unresolved murders

Some families have to find a way of adapting to long-term uncertainty, perhaps never knowing what happened to a son or daughter, who killed them, or even whether he or she is alive or dead. For the police, an unsolved murder file is never closed, and developments in forensic science hold out promises of charges being brought when old cases are reviewed. But the family needs to find a way of grieving which will make it possible to continue with the rest of their lives. Decisions will need to be made about the possibility of holding a memorial or thanksgiving service, even though no body has been found. For some families, this might feel like the abandonment of hope, but for others it is the right decision.

Looking to the future

When we prepared this leaflet, we sought guidance from parents of murdered children. They offered us some of the ways that have helped them:

- Seeking changes in the law so that the same thing does not happen to others. Laws governing the carrying of knives in Scotland were changed as a result of a campaign following the murder of a teenager, and the “Snowdrop” campaign petitioned against handguns following the shootings at Dunblane. The development of the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) has been set up in an effort to protect children from abuse and possibly murder.

- Creating a focus for good memories dedicated to our child: a seat in a public place, for example, a garden, a trust or award for a cause dear to us or our child.
- Learning over time to focus on the life, the joy our child brought us. If the roles were reversed and we had been murdered, we would not want them to be consumed with despair or hatred so that their life, too, was destroyed. Perhaps we can think of how our child would wish us to survive, to be strong and positive in memory of them.

Some people may think we are 'getting over it' when they see us just simply living our life and outwardly in control of our emotions. It is then that self-help and befriending groups, who know the difference between the apparent outward normality and the constant inward struggle to maintain it, can offer true understanding and support as we endeavour to make long-term sense of the savage event that has destroyed a precious member of the family.

It is a life-long struggle to find our own way of integrating the murder of our child into the fabric of the rest of your life. 'Moving on' does not mean leaving our child behind, but in some way, we can carry him or her forward with us. We never stop loving our child, and very slowly the good memories become a source of comfort and strength.

Just as TCF was born out of the realisation that bereaved parents had very particular help to offer to other bereaved parents, so the group within our organisation, FBbH (Families Bereaved by Homicide), offers the support that can only be given by those who can truthfully say, "Yes, we know this pain, we have been there." Support for parents whose child has been murdered is also available through SAMM (Support After Murder and Manslaughter) and PoMC (Parents of Murdered Children). These organisations along with TCF are there to befriend, whenever families seek help. TCF has a selection of publications including a range of over thirty leaflets, an extensive Postal Library, a quarterly journal Compassion, and a network of bereaved parents ready to offer support through our national Helpline (by telephone or email) and at local level.

TCF Postal Library

Tel: 0345 120 3785

Email: library@tcf.org.uk

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Northern Ireland Helpline 0288 77 88 016

The printing of this leaflet has been sponsored by

Yeovil Area Support Group – TCF

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Founder: The Rev. Dr Simon Stephens OBE RN

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Company No 04029535 Charity No 1082335

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