



The death of a stepchild

A nationwide organisation of bereaved parents and their families



THE DEATH OF A STEPCHILD

We live in a society that produces many variations of blended families, and anyone may find themselves in either an active or passive step-parenting role when they and their children embark on a new long-term relationship. The step-family may come about following bereavement, through single parenthood or after separation or divorce, and the stepchildren may live part- or full-time in the new family.

When our stepchild dies, we may find that some people do not adequately recognise or acknowledge our grief and we may be overlooked in their concern for the birth-parents' welfare. This attitude is hurtful and can leave us feeling an outsider in our own family. Our feelings are important and just as we may have loved and cared for our stepchild, so we feel grief and loss at their death.

Those of us who are recent family members may feel deep affection for the daughter or son of the partner we love, even though we may have known the child for only a short time. We will feel shock and grief over the death and be concerned for our partner and any surviving children. We might, however, feel isolated when the family is going over earlier memories of the child, at the funeral or at later family gatherings.

Those step-parents who joined the family after the death of the child may also be affected by the feelings described above. Nevertheless, we may be able to bring comfort, support and practical help to the family because our emotional involvement in the situation may be less intense. It is not always easy, however, to understand the very profound and variable

emotions that parents experience after the death of their child. The emotional seesaw of bereavement is as bewildering to the parent as it is to others, and can continue for a very long time.

Unforeseen difficulties may arise as the birth-parents come together to organise funeral arrangements and appropriate memorial activities. Either of them may feel responsible for the death of their child, or that the other was to blame, and there may be feelings of anger, guilt, remorse and failure. Some birth parents may experience unnecessary suffering if their ex-partner's step-family appears to "take over" their child's funeral. At this time there may also be practical difficulties to be resolved, such as the wording on memorials reflecting recognition and acceptance of both birth- and step-parents' deep feelings towards the child. Every parent wants their child to be remembered always with dignity, respect and above all, love. Compassion and diplomacy are vital and will help pave the way for a more peaceful future. Although our own feelings are hard to cope with, hopefully we will be able to give comfort to our partner by our physical presence and affection.

Sometimes surviving children turn to us for guidance, support and reassurance. They may want to talk about their parents' grief, and about their dead sister or brother, perhaps sharing feelings they cannot express elsewhere. We can encourage the surviving children not to feel guilty that they are still alive. We will also be able to help them by taking an interest in their everyday lives and activities when our partner is finding it difficult to take their usual part in family life. We should try to ensure that other children in the family, or families, are included at this time, sharing tears and laughter, difficult and good memories. We should be aware of the emotions of surviving siblings who are not blood related to the child who has died, as they may feel a deep regret that they have lost

the opportunity to get to know their step brother or sister.

Some of us will be planning to have children in our new relationship. It could be painful to see the earlier death and subsequent grief cast a shadow over our partner's feelings, as the memories, fears and anxieties are carried forward. We may be able to help our partner by finding ways to talk through the past loss. If we can do this, we will be able to look to the future together while never forgetting what has gone before.

The child who died may have spent more time with one set of grandparents. All the grandparents, however, can be a resource to the grieving family in their different ways, and can help to bring comfort and stability to its members, especially the children. If the children can feel supported by all their extended family, then the various generations and branches of the family may grow closer together.

Death often evokes past losses, and each person's present grief will be affected by their own experiences. Our partner may have thought that feelings of loss relating to the end of the previous relationship were resolved, but now finds that painful issues are re-emerging, particularly so if he or she was widowed.

It may be that our partner has lost his or her only child, whereas we have surviving children; this can bring complicated guilt feelings, particularly for long-term step-parents.

We may find we are experiencing mixed feelings towards the child who died when we see how our partner and others in the family are suffering. We may regret that our relationship with the stepchild was not as cordial as we would have wished.

Perhaps we found the child's personality incompatible with ours. Alternatively the child may have rejected us, despite our continuing overtures of friendship. It often helps to acknowledge these feelings by writing them down, perhaps in the form of a diary or in a letter to the dead child which no one need see, and which we need not keep for ever.

These difficulties may cause painful rifts in our relationship as we struggle to adjust to the child's death. Even though we may feel isolated at times, particularly if we have joined the family recently, we are also in a unique position to be of positive, practical and emotional help within the household. However, while we are helping others in the family, remember that we too need support, perhaps from a friend or colleague who will allow us to talk about all that is going on at home. Reading about parental grief can be of value and may help us understand our partner's feelings and reactions.

For step-parents, grieving may be a precarious journey as we try to balance the needs of our partner, our own feelings and other family relationships. We do, however, have a supportive role to play and it is a time when patience, understanding and tolerance are of the utmost value. Many step-parents and their families have found hope for the future through *The Compassionate Friends (TCF)*, sharing experiences, feelings and concerns with other parents, perhaps meeting, or corresponding with, other step-parents in an atmosphere of understanding, acceptance and friendship.

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

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 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, private Facebook groups, and support forum where bereaved parents can 'talk' online. A quarterly journal, **Compassion**, is also produced, containing articles and poems written by our members about their own experiences. Those who wish for further reading can borrow from our **Postal Library**.

For general enquiries, and details of how to become a member of TCF, please contact the office (details overleaf).

# The Compassionate Friends

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**UK Helpline 0345 1 23 23 04**

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## **TCF Postal Library**

Tel: 0345 120 3785      Email: library@tcf.org.uk

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