



The Compassionate Friends

The Police and Bereaved Parents

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) is a charitable organisation of bereaved parents, siblings and grandparents dedicated to the support and care of other similarly bereaved family members who have suffered the death of a child or children of any age and from any cause. In your role as a police officer, you may on occasion have to deliver news of the death of a child to their parent(s). We hope that this leaflet will be helpful to you in these circumstances.

The Police and Bereaved Parents

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) is a charitable organisation of bereaved parents, siblings and grandparents dedicated to the support and care of other similarly bereaved family members.

This leaflet has been written by bereaved parents for police officers. It concerns the difficult task of informing parents of the death of their child.

The child(ren) may have been of any age, including adult, and death may have been from any cause – illness, unknown natural causes, accident, road traffic incident, drug abuse, homicide or suicide.

We are aware that there are often guidelines or protocols that inform the actions of police officers in these circumstances. However, we do hope the following will be a useful supplement, written as it has been from our perspectives and experiences as bereaved parents.

Initial contact

One of the most distressing tasks you will have to face is **breaking the news** to parents that their child has died. In many instances they will be totally unprepared for such a devastating shock. Sometimes parents may already know of the death, but they will still need appropriate care and understanding. This tragedy will change the lives of every member of the family forever.

Parents may exhibit a range of reactions, such as silence, disbelief, shock, hysterical crying, anger and even violence, along with a barrage of questions for which you may not yet have answers. If you find it a challenge to know how to respond, remember that it is very much worse for the parents.

You will need to **combine professionalism with the utmost compassion and kindness**. The way in which you and your colleagues communicate with the parents in these early moments and hours of their grief will have a lasting impact. Parents have described how they have replayed the initial conversation with police officers regarding the death of their child over and over again in their minds. For some, the comforting reassurance they were offered helped calm them in the moment. For others, insensitivity created lasting distress.

Whenever possible, parents who are living as a couple should be **told together**. Sometimes the father is told on his own in an effort to 'protect' the mother, but this rarely does anything but add to the distress of both parents. If one of the parents is temporarily absent, you will have to decide how best to convey the news.

If the parents are divorced or living apart it may not be possible to talk to them together. Again, you will need to judge how best to ensure both parents are informed.

Some police officers speak first to a **neighbour** to confirm that they are approaching the right family, or to gain information about their whereabouts. If you need to do this, do not reveal the death to the neighbour.

If you need to inform a parent at **their workplace**, it is best to ask the management for a private room where you can break the news. A manager or member of the HR department may also be able to suggest a sympathetic colleague who can help with any work-related arrangements if you will be taking the parent home. Again, do not give the reason for your visit to anyone else before speaking with the parent.

Although a sudden death may be the result of **a crime**, bear in mind that this may be the last thing on the parents' minds. Please treat parents with particular sensitivity when making your enquiries.

The initial conversation

- **Introduce yourself**, explaining that you are bringing bad news and ask if you may come in.
- **Invite the parents to sit down.** Be aware that from the moment of your appearance, they may quickly assume that something is terribly wrong, and you will not want to increase their distress by delaying.
- **Explain gently, but clearly and directly**, that their child has died. Do not rush the news; give them time to take it in. While euphemisms such as 'passed away' are not helpful, it is best at this early stage to avoid detailed explanations of what has happened.
- **Use the child's name**, or 'your son' or 'your daughter'. Avoid de-personalising the dead child by describing them as 'the deceased', 'the body' or 'the remains'.
- **Avoid using jargon** or making remarks that could come across as trite or not genuinely sincere. If you do feel that something has come across in a clumsy or insensitive way, a simple apology at that moment could really help.
- It is vital that you give the parents **your full attention** during this conversation. This includes turning off your radio or at least not responding to non-urgent communications.
- Some parents may be in too much shock to **ask questions**, but others will immediately want to know as many details as possible. If you do not know the answers to their questions, tell the parents you will find out and let them know – and then make sure you do so.
- Take care when dealing with cases of **suspected homicide or suicide** that you do not use or imply either of those words. It is the Coroner's (or in Scotland, the Procurator Fiscal's) job to establish the cause of death.

- **Write down any information or details you are giving the parents.** Despite the fact that nearly all parents vividly recall the emotional response of the police officer, and perhaps remembering verbatim what was said at the time, their memory of practical points may be hazy or missed altogether.
- Offer parents a little **time on their own** after you have told them, although some may welcome your presence and practical support – maybe a cup of tea or coffee.
- Try to ensure that a parent is **not left alone** when you leave the house unless they specifically request this.
- **Ask if there is anyone you can contact for them** – relatives, doctor, minister of religion, or friends.
- **Other children in the family need consideration.** If parents feel unable to collect children from school, they may need help arranging for someone else to do so. Telephone the school, a friend or relative and arrange for the children to be brought home without telling them that their brother or sister has died.
- If you are attending the home following a **sudden infant death** (SIDS), visit the baby's bedroom sensitively. Unless you have a very sound reason, do not separate the parents. Explain that you are acting for the Coroner (or, in Scotland, the Procurator Fiscal), to complete the necessary enquiries.

Signposting

- **Leave your name**, and make sure **details of police telephone numbers, who they may contact and at what times of day** are clearly available for them; they may want to ring and ask questions afterwards. It may help to suggest that outside of these times they could write down any questions they have to ask later.
- If you are making the initial visit to the parents before a **Police Family Liaison Officer (FLO)** becomes involved, explain to the parents what they can expect from the FLO, including when they are likely to be contacted by them.
- Please provide the parents with information about **The Compassionate Friends** (TCF) where they will be able to access personal support from others who have gone through a similar tragedy. Your service may wish to keep on hand copies of the small leaflet *Introducing the Compassionate Friends*. This is available free of charge from the TCF office (contact details on the back page.)
- You may also wish to suggest that the parents **inform their GP** of what has happened, so that appropriate medical or other support can be offered.

Identification and visiting their child

- If the parents need to **identify** their son or daughter, it is important to explain this and prepare them in advance for what it involves – clearly and with sensitivity and compassion.
- While parents are likely to wish to visit their child as soon as possible, it is best that they **do not drive themselves**. They will also need transport home afterwards. If you or a colleague are unable to help with transport, then a relative or friend may be available, but do not assume this. Arrangements for the temporary care of any other children may be required if extended family or friends are not available.

- If it is not necessary for parents to identify their child at the place where he or she died, they should be told where they are at this moment, and **where and when they can see them in the mortuary**. This should be at a time suitable to them and arranged with the mortuary staff in advance and as soon as possible.
- Parents do have the **right to see** their child's body, except sometimes in cases of suspected homicide. This can be very important for them, particularly after a sudden unexpected death. Informed choice is a key principle here and there may be different wishes between parents which should be ascertained and respected.
- Unless there are evidential or practical reasons to prevent it, parents should be allowed to **see, touch and hold their child** if they wish. Be very clear in advance what is possible and why. Where it is not possible, explain as clearly and tactfully as you can why they are not allowed to touch or see their child at this time.
- Take time to encourage parents to ask any questions they have about seeing, touching and holding their child, and be prepared to answer them. Bear in mind that the parents may not realise they can do this or may be afraid to ask. Most will accept the opportunity and are helped by having done so, but there should be discussion first with no assumptions made. It is each **parent's own decision whether or not to see their child**, unless they have been requested to do so for identification purposes. Leave the parents to be alone with their child if they wish.
- Many parents would also wish to **visit the place where their child died**; it will be helpful if you can organise this.
- The child's **clothes and belongings** should be handled with respect. Some parents will want to have these as soon as possible (as long as they are not needed as evidence); others may prefer to arrange for someone else to collect them on their behalf or may

not wish to receive them back. Respect informed choice and do not rush this process; give them time if they need it.

- Always try to give parents notification that belongings are to be returned. Be mindful of the language you use: 'belongings' may be preferable to 'exhibits' or 'personal effects'. Items should be returned in a suitable bag or box; never put them into a plastic rubbish bag.

A cushion of kindness

Parents will experience intense and devastating pain at the news of their child's death. This pain may be prolonged and intensified if their child has died following substance use, through suicide, or through involvement in criminal or gang activities. Such circumstances often bring stigma and criticism, both within families and on social or mainstream media. You cannot prevent this, but you can provide an initial cushion of compassion, care and concern. This will be a great support to the parents at this most difficult time.

While you are with them, give the parents all of your attention and as much time as you can. The manner in which parents are informed of the tragedy of their child's death has an important and lasting impact on how they go on to manage their grief. Concern and care are remembered with the utmost appreciation.

Thank you for taking the time to read this leaflet. We appreciate all that you can do to support the bereaved parents you encounter. Your kindness gives us a safe space in which to begin coping with our grief and to keep moving onwards with our lives.

Breaking the news of a child's death to their parents

Summary of essential steps

- **Preparation:** Bring along all available and relevant information.
- **Disclosure:** Give the news about their child's death to the parents first, before revealing this to others.
- **Composure:** If necessary, take a few moments on the doorstep to ensure you feel calm and competent. Prepare yourself for a range of strong reactions.
- **Introduction:** Give your name and rank clearly. Ask permission to come inside. Invite the parents to sit.
- **Situation:** Find out whether there are any other children in the household.
- **Communication:** State the reason for your visit clearly, without euphemisms. Avoid jargon or clichés. Refer to the child by their name or as 'son' or daughter'.
- **Focus:** Give the parents your full attention. Try to take as much time for this conversation as they need.
- **Transport:** Help the parents with arrangements for identifying their child and/or visiting them in the mortuary.
- **Support:** Give them your own contact details and/or of the FLO who will be assigned to them. Offer information about The Compassionate Friends.
- **Before leaving:** Avoid leaving a parent alone, unless they specifically request this. Find out if there is anyone you can contact on their behalf.

Notes

Who are the Compassionate Friends?

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) is a charitable organisation of bereaved parents, siblings and grandparents dedicated to the support and care of other similarly bereaved family members who have suffered the death of a child or children of any age and from any cause. We offer support, both directly to bereaved families, and indirectly by fostering understanding and good practice amongst professionals concerned with child death and by increasing public awareness of parental grief.

TCF has no religious affiliation and offers support to bereaved families irrespective of the age of the child (from a baby of a few weeks old to an adult son or daughter) or cause of death.

Parents and family members can find support and information about our services by calling our Helpline on **0345 123 2304** or at **helpline@tcf.org.uk**. Our website at **www.tcf.org.uk/support** also has information about our services and support for bereaved parents, siblings and grandparents.

We can supply, free of charge, to any police force, training college or family liaison officer printed information about our services to give to bereaved families. Please contact us at **info@tcf.org.uk** or **0345 120 3785** to order copies.



The
**Compassionate
Friends**

UK Helpline:

0345 123 2304

General Enquiries

0345 120 3785

E: info@tcf.org.uk

TCF Library

0345 120 3785

E: library@tcf.org.uk

www.tcf.org.uk |  [@tcf.org.uk](https://www.facebook.com/tcf.org.uk)  [@TCFcharityUK](https://twitter.com/TCFcharityUK)

8.10.2011 - the day the sunshine vanished from my world - "I would trade all my tomorrows for just one more day with you" - Jake, my beautiful boy, taken in a tragic road traffic accident aged 23 years.

Founder: The Revd Canon Dr Simon Stephens OBE

President: The Countess Mountbatten of Burma