



## **The Police and Bereaved Parents**

A nationwide organisation of bereaved parents and their families



## ***Essential steps:***

- “ **Preparation** *take all available information with you*
- “ **Disclosure** *never tell the bad news to the neighbours before the parents.*
- “ **Composure** *take deep breaths on the doorstep to calm yourself*
- “ **Introduction** *give your name and rank, ask to come in*
- “ **Communication** *gather the family together; ask if any children should stay to hear; avoid 'police jargon'; use the child's name*
- “ **Awareness** *the family is unprepared for your visit reactions might be: disbelief, shock, anger, violence, silence, sobbing, hysteria. . .*
- “ **Cot deaths** *explain that you are working for the Coroner (or Procurator Fiscal)*
- “ **Transport** *if identification is needed, discuss arrangements for transport there and back*
- “ **Departure** *never leave a person alone, unless requested*
- “ **Follow-up** *call again, whenever you can.*

*The Compassionate Friends* (TCF) has written this leaflet for police officers; in the text 'you' refers to the police officer working with the bereaved family. It is mainly concerned with the difficult job of informing parents of the death of their son or daughter. Although we refer to 'parents' throughout this leaflet, it is of course quite possible that only one parent will be available to you. There will be other situations when they may already know of the death, but they will still need appropriate care and understanding.

TCF is an organisation of bereaved parents providing support and understanding to other bereaved parents and their families. The child(ren) may have been of any age, including adult, and death may have been from any cause - illness, unknown natural causes, accident, drug abuse, homicide or suicide. TCF also provides help and advice to many professional organisations working with the surviving relatives, and is currently involved in several Police Family Liaison Officer training courses. Input from a TCF member to these courses offers a particular insight into the handling of these difficult situations. Members' experiences have been used to provide the material in this leaflet.

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One of the most difficult and distressing tasks you will have to face is **breaking the news** to parents of their child's death. In many instances this will come as a devastating shock, and they will be totally unprepared. This will be a tragedy that will change the lives of all members of a family forever. How *you* treat them in the early moments and hours of their grief will have a lasting impact. You will have to cope with any reaction, ranging through disbelief, shock, anger, violence, silence or questions from either or both of the parents. You will have to try hard to keep calm yourself and to avoid making trite

remarks such as 'You'll get over it' and 'Time heals'.

Whenever possible, the parents 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. One of the parents may be temporarily absent and you will have to decide how best he or she is to be told the bad news. If there are other children in the house, you will need to ask the parents if they wish them to remain in the room. Though you, as a police officer, recognise that when called to a sudden death you will need to be alert to the **possibility of a crime**, this may be the last thing in the parents' minds, so sensitivity is called for in both words and actions when enquiries are being made.

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 bad news** to the neighbour. It is better to ask the parents later if they would like a particular friend or neighbour to be informed.

You may have to go to a **workplace** to inform a parent. You should ask the management for a private room where you can break the news. They may be able to provide a sympathetic member of staff who can help with any work-related arrangements when you have to take the parent home.

You should **introduce yourself** when you call, explain that you are bringing bad news and ask if you may come in. The parents should then be told **gently, but clearly and directly**, that their child has died. Do not **rush** the news; give them time to digest it. Whenever possible this should be in private and with everyone sitting down. Avoid 'de-personalising' the dead child by using such expressions as 'the deceased', 'the body' or 'the remains'. **Use the child's name**, or 'your son' or 'your daughter'. While it is not helpful to use euphemisms such as

'passed away', it is also unhelpful to be too detailed in explaining what has happened, especially in the early stages.

If you do not know the answers to their questions, tell the parents you will find out and let them know - *and then do so*. Take extreme care when dealing with cases of suspected homicide or suicide. Do not use or imply either of those words. It is the Coroner's (in Scotland, the Procurator Fiscal's) job to decide on this.

Some parents may welcome a little time on their own after you have told them, others may welcome your presence and practical support - a cup of tea or coffee; is there anyone you can telephone for them - relatives, doctor, clergy? Do ask.

**Other children** in the family need consideration. If they are at school and the parents feel unable to collect them, perhaps you could telephone the school, or a friend, and arrange for the children to be brought home without telling them that their brother or sister has died.

**Write down** any information or details you are giving the parents. Most people are very shocked at this time and unable to retain details given to them verbally. Leave your name, telephone number and shift times clearly available for them; they may want to ring and ask questions later. Though nearly all parents recall vividly the emotional response of the police officer, and may even remember verbatim what was said at the time, memory of practical points may be hazy or missed altogether. Try to ensure that a parent is not left alone when you leave the house, unless they specifically request this.

If the parents have to go to **identify** their son or daughter, it is best that they do not have to drive themselves, and they will need transport home again. If you or a colleague are unable to do this, then a relative or friend may be available. Unless there is any evidential reason to prevent it, allow the parents to see, touch and hold their child if they want to. They may not know

that they can do this or be afraid to ask; leave them to be on their own with their child if they want this. You may have to make arrangements for the temporary care of any other children in the family. If it is not necessary for the parents to identify their child at the place where he or she died, they should be told that they can see him or her in the **mortuary**, at a time suitable to them and arranged with the police and the mortuary staff. If it is necessary to move the child's body, perhaps from a local hospital to a mortuary with special facilities, it is important to do so with careful regard to the feelings of the parents, in a dignified and respectful way.

Parents have the **right to see** their child's body. Most want to and are helped by having done so, but there should be discussions first, and no assumptions made. It is best if the parents are warned of any visible injuries so that they know what to expect. It is each parent's own decision whether or not to see their child. They may also wish to visit the place where their child died; it would be helpful if you could arrange this.

The child's **clothes and belongings** must 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. Don't rush this process, give them time if they need it. Try to give parents notification that belongings are to be returned, and *never* put them into a plastic rubbish bag.

Remember that you are talking about the parents' **loved son or daughter**. Whatever the parents' life-style, they are going to experience intense and devastating pain at your news. Avoid implying any criticism of their child. Compassion, care and concern are needed now; with these you can be a great support to the parents at the most difficult time in their lives.

Give them all your attention, and as much time as you are able. **Follow-up enquiries** should, if possible, involve the same officers who have been in contact with the family; some families are glad to welcome 'their' police officer back.

If you are attending a **cot death**, visit the baby's bedroom sensitively and, 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. Official attitudes to multiple cot deaths have changed in recent years; among cot deaths, less than half of one per cent prove to be non-accidental.

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During your time as a police officer, you may have to deliver news of the death of a son or daughter. It is not 'soft' or 'unprofessional' to feel and to show genuine emotional response during or after this difficult duty. We hope that this leaflet will be helpful to you.

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#### Links

[www.lullabytrust.org.uk](http://www.lullabytrust.org.uk); [www.sadsuk.org](http://www.sadsuk.org); [www.c-r-y.org.uk](http://www.c-r-y.org.uk);  
(*deal with Sudden Infant and Sudden Adult deaths*)

[www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org); [www.roadpeace.org](http://www.roadpeace.org); [www.brake.org](http://www.brake.org)  
[www.childdeathhelpline.org.uk](http://www.childdeathhelpline.org.uk); [www.childbereavement.org.uk](http://www.childbereavement.org.uk)

TCF works with all these organizations, but it is perhaps the only one in which *every member is a bereaved parent* and understands the enormity of the loss suffered by newly bereaved parents. TCF has no religious or racial affiliations; the bond between its members is the death of their child, of any age, and from any cause. Thank you for reading this leaflet. We much appreciate any mention you could make of our organisation.

# The Compassionate Friends

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**UK Helpline 0345 1 23 23 04**

Northern Ireland Helpline 0288 77 88 016

## **TCF Postal Library**

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

The printing of this leaflet was sponsored by Teesside Group in loving memory of all the children who left this world too soon.

Your names we often mention, our thoughts are with you still, you haven't been forgotten and we know you never will.

Founder: The Revd Canon Dr Simon Stephens OBE

President: The Countess Mountbatten of Burma

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