



The
Compassionate
Friends

Grieving for Our Young Child

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

Grieving for Our Young Child

This leaflet is especially for parents who are bereaved of a child of pre-school or primary school age, from 2–10 years of age.

As parents we experience both joy and challenges as we watch our children leave infancy behind. They steadily grow and change. In time they go to playgroups or school and make their first childhood friendships. There is so much more to look forward to. Tragically, for some of us, our dreams for the life that our child has ahead of them are then shattered. Their dying brings unspeakable sadness, devastation, shock and loneliness. It might not seem possible that it is even real – that our irreplaceable child is no longer with us. It is not easy to adjust to life without our beloved child, and it will take us time to find our way.

Our life without our child

Our child's death may have been anticipated, for instance if they were suffering from a life-limiting illness, or it may have been sudden and without warning. Whatever the circumstance, we are enduring one of the toughest experiences we could possibly face as parents.

We miss our child. We expect to get them up in the morning, give them breakfast, see them off to school, nursery or childcare. We expect them home again in the afternoons. Perhaps we supervise homework. At the weekends there are outings, activities and games. All of that is finished now. Instead we are faced with the terrible void of where our child should be.

There are so many firsts in the early years, depending on their health and abilities: first cycle or swimming lessons, going to their first match or dance show. Our children had so much more to look

forward to, and we with them. Now life can feel stark and empty. Our heart aches. Our home is perhaps quieter now than it was before. Even if we have other children, the soundtrack of our home is changed by our child's absence.

Our daily lives have been very closely intertwined with our children. They need us and we need them. It can be very difficult to know what to do with all the love and care that we still have but can no longer physically give to our child who has died. We may feel we have lost our own identity.

There are other factors that could make this loss even harder to bear, such as if we do not have a supportive relationship with a partner who will walk with us through our grief. If we have no other children, we could be in despair. If we have other children, it can be a great struggle to care for them while in a state of acute grief.

Our feelings

We may be experiencing strong emotions of grief, anger and despair. Sometimes we might direct these feelings at others, as we feel the need to place blame even when there is none. If we have a partner, we may feel like we have let them down in the way we looked after our child, or vice versa. We could also feel as though we have failed as a unit. As a lone parent, we may experience a similar sense of guilt. We are plagued by 'what ifs': could I have done more? It is natural for us to have these questions, but also equally important to realise that usually feelings of responsibility and guilt are unfounded. In most circumstances, our child's death could not have been prevented by us or anybody else. There may be resentment and jealousy towards other parents as their lives carry on as normal; these feelings are understandable and they will soften as time passes.

We may find there is a certain expectation from others as to how we should react and cope. We may be responsible for contacting family and friends, as well as our child's school. Relaying this terrible

news is no easy task. If we are a lone parent, we may be dealing with the emotional and practical consequences of the death of our child without much support. It is important that we do things in our own way, when we feel able to. We all have days when we feel unable to function, and others when we feel a tiny bit stronger and more up to confronting such tasks.

Our child's belongings and personal space

Items belonging to our child will be precious to us – books, drawings, schoolwork, toys or gym kit. We may want to contact their school or other location where they spent time to arrange to collect these items. If we do not feel ready to do this ourselves, perhaps we could ask a friend to pick them up for us.

At home, our child will have had their own personal space, such as their bedroom, and their belongings may also be scattered around other parts of the home. The task of sorting out our child's possessions and clothes may fill us with dread; we may not even be able to enter our child's room for fear of being overwhelmed by grief. It is important for us to realise that there is no hurry. It is entirely our choice when or even if we will take care of these matters.

If there is nobody at home who might use these items, we will be left with questions as to what we should do with them. Some of us will choose to keep a few memorable items – perhaps things that were treasured by our child, such as a favourite jacket, a musical instrument or their smartphone. If we have other children, they may wish to keep some special items, too.

We may eventually decide to dispose of some things, perhaps giving them to friends or to charity. If we do not rush the process, we may find the “right” place for many of these items. Some parents donate items to their child's school or friends. Others have their clothes made into patchwork quilts or cushions.

On the other hand, some parents prefer to preserve their child's room as it was when they were alive, at least to begin with. This is our choice and we should not feel pressured to make quick decisions. It is worth bearing in mind that the way we – and other members of the family – feel about these material reminders of our child may change as time passes.

Our child may have had their own phone or device such as a laptop or tablet computer. They may have their own 'digital footprints' – a blog or social media app where they posted pictures and videos. These footprints in the online world could contain many precious memories and moments that we want to preserve. More information and advice on this can be found in The Compassionate Friends (TCF) leaflet *Our Child, Social Media and Their Digital Legacy*: www.tcf.org.uk/content/r-digital-legacy

If we have other children

There is no easy way to tell our other children that their sibling has died, yet they may surprise us with their frank and honest responses and questions.

Encouraging communication with our other children is usually a good idea. One of the worst things for surviving children is feeling left out and not knowing what is going on. The understanding of death develops as children become older, though there can be a lot of individual variation. In general, we are likely to find that as children approach 5-7 years old, they begin to understand the concept of death as being permanent and irreversible.

The dynamics in our family will have changed, and it is possible that new tensions and discords may develop. The relationships between remaining siblings may also alter.

The way that our children express their grief could depend on their personality, age and level of maturity, as well as the particular circumstances of their sibling's death and their relationship

beforehand. In almost every household, there are times of minor conflict and disagreement. These could now give rise to complex feelings and even self-blame. This underlines the importance of our children getting support as they grieve. Talking openly about their sibling and remembering them through activities such as putting up photos or making a memory box can all be important for this process.

If our remaining children are of school age, we will need to inform the school of what has happened. If possible, it will be helpful to talk with their teacher or another staff member about their return to school. It is likely that their schoolwork or behaviour will be affected by the death of their sibling, and even if this is not the case, they will need extra support and understanding within the school environment.

For information about how children may react to bereavement, depending on their age and developmental stage, see:

www.cruse.org.uk/Children/children-understanding-death

Our child's friends and playmates

If our children went to a playgroup, preschool or primary school, they will have most likely had friends and playmates. We may have also formed friendships with their parents. We probably know who is in the circle of friends of our young child of toddler or preschool age. This might not always be the case for our primary school age child, particularly in the last years of primary school where they are on the cusp of adolescence. They may also have other friends on social media.

Depending on the circumstances and age of our child, we may want to consider reaching out to the parents of these children to let them know what has happened. It will be up to them to decide how to explain about our child's death to their own children.

Our child's school

The way that the school staff and trustees handle the news of the death of our child can play an important part in how the wider school community goes on to manage their reaction to this tragedy. Hopefully they will be receptive to our wishes on matters such as how the school is informed, the presence of teachers and parents at the funeral or memorial service, the return of our child's belongings, and any future events held in our child's memory.

We may wish to write a short statement for the school to share with the parents in our child's class or year, to help ensure that other parents know the facts of what happened rather than hearing about it in a piecemeal way. This might be particularly important if our child's death was sudden or unexpected.

If our child was the victim of bullying or other difficult situations within their school environment or amongst their peers, we might have mixed feelings about interacting with some of the other parents.

Our social circle

One of the difficult things about being bereaved of a young child can be a sudden loss of our peer group of friends, such as the parents of our child's friends or classmates. Perhaps we will no longer meet up with them at school functions, birthday parties, sports and other social events. We might not be invited, or if we do take part, it could be incredibly painful. Parents we continue to socialise with may not be comfortable when we speak about our child. We may find this difficult to manage. All of this means that important pieces of our adult friendship world might vanish.

We might find that other parents, friends and family members use social media to talk about our bereavement. Whilst they may be very well meaning, there may be times when we feel comments being shared are inappropriate, hurtful or unhelpful. If this

becomes an issue, we may decide to ask a designated parent or friend to help us manage some of the posts or photos.

Taking care of ourselves

We will need to make a special effort to take care of ourselves in the midst of our grief. This includes physical care – eating well, getting rest and exercising – as well as emotional and psychological care. It can help to talk with others, or perhaps to try to write down our feelings. Participating in activities which have previously helped us to relax may be a good idea, such as walking in nature, baking, crafting, listening to music or reading. Above all, we need to be kind to ourselves and not apply pressure by trying desperately to do all we used to do. Our life has changed, and we need time and space for this massive adjustment.

If we can take time to look after ourselves physically and emotionally, it may help us psychologically. However, some of us find that self-care is not sufficient, and we are too overwhelmed by our loss. If that is our situation, we can turn to our GP for signposting to services such as bereavement counselling.

We are fortunate if we have friends and family members who try to support and understand us in our loss. On the other hand, it is not uncommon to find that some established friendships falter, as people struggle knowing what to say. We may even find that some friends and acquaintances avoid us. This might be their first encounter with the death of a young child, and they may be at a loss to know how to express condolences or offer support. Some people's comments, while well-meaning, can come across as insensitive and even hurtful. To be told that our child's death "was probably for the best", that we can "try again for another baby" or that our child "was an angel that went to heaven" may not be any comfort. Similarly, remarks about us having other children, as if this might be a comfort, could make us feel particularly misunderstood.

We may wish to quietly step away from those whose comments make our grief harder to bear.

All of this underlines how important it can be to communicate with other bereaved parents who can understand what we are going through because they have been there too. Many of us find this mutual support invaluable. The Compassionate Friends (TCF) holds digital, local and national meetings for bereaved parents, and offers online and telephone support. It can be such a comfort to know that we are not alone, and talking with others may help us find our own way forward.

Adjusting to life without our child's presence

Our life will never be the same again. No matter how much time goes by, we will always be a parent to our child, and we will always miss them.

Many of us have found that remembrance activities enable us to keep a continued bond with our child and can be very comforting, albeit bittersweet. Such activities could include lighting candles, planting a tree in their memory, visiting their favourite places, making a book with their photographs, and much more.

We may need to brace ourselves when preparing for significant dates such as our child's birthday or the anniversary of their death. Finding an appropriate activity that acknowledges our child and celebrates their life can be helpful in managing the rollercoaster of emotions that we might experience at such times. We may wish to visit places we had been to together or bake a cake that was their favourite. Again, this will be bittersweet, as they are not here to enjoy it with us.

As the years pass, we may find ourselves imagining what our child would have been doing or how they might have looked, had they lived. Such thoughts are not unusual, but are nevertheless very

upsetting. Many of us find it helps to have someone in whom we can confide, knowing that they will not react with shock or judgement when we express our thoughts and feelings.

The way forward

The loss of a child of any age is devastating. However long or short their life, this was our unique child whom we cared for and will always continue to love. We honour their memory in the way that we live our lives now. In time, we will find that the intense pain of our grief softens, and we are able to find a way forward, carrying precious memories and the love of our child forever in our hearts and minds.

Further Reading

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) have published a range of leaflets to support parents who have experienced the death of their child. The following titles could be helpful at this time:

- *Living with Grief*
- *A Mother's Grief*
- *A Father's Grief*
- *Our Surviving Children*
- *Our Children's Friends*
- *Remembering Our Child (Leaflet and Handbook)*
- *Grieving for Our Disabled Child*

This leaflet is for children in the 2-10 year age group. For other ages, see:

- *Grieving for Our Baby*
- *Grieving for Our Pre-teen or Teenage Child*
- *The Death of an Adult Child*

TCF leaflets can be read and downloaded at this link:

www.tcf.org.uk/leaflets

Printed copies are available from the office, free of charge for bereaved parents (see contact details on the back page).



The
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To find out more about TCF visit

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

This leaflet is sponsored in Loving Memory of our "Beautiful Boy" Dylan-James 2014 - 2018. Gone too soon "Somewhere over the Rainbow". Until we are together again DJ, keep smiling, giggling and enjoying ice cream. You are forever loved and missed every second of the day. We remember you always.

Founder: The Revd Canon Dr Simon Stephens OBE

President: The Countess Mountbatten of Burma