



The  
Compassionate  
Friends

## Grieving for Our Pre-teen or Teenage Child



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

# Grieving for Our Pre-teen or Teenage Child

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This leaflet is especially for parents who are bereaved of a child of secondary school age, from 11–18 years of age.

Being a parent brings both challenges and joy. Our children are continuously entering new chapters in their lives: from days spent in the family home onto playgroups and school, making their first childhood friendships. By the time a child reaches their teenage years, they have moved into a more complex phase of growing up. Heartbreakingly, for some of us, our hopes and dreams for our child are then shattered. The death of a child brings unspeakable sadness, devastation, shock and loneliness, regardless of the cause or whether it was sudden and unexpected, or anticipated due to illness. It is not easy to adjust to life without our beloved child, and it will take us time to find our way.

## Being a parent to a teenager

Every child is unique in so many ways. They have their own personality, likes and dislikes, hopes and plans for the future. Depending on our child's age, we will have seen at first hand the tremendous changes that come with puberty. Our child has had to deal with a changing body, powerful swings in emotion, and a shifting sense of themselves and their place in the world. Teenagers can be judgemental of their parents, and society in general. They often feel invincible. Risk-taking activities are common, and they may have endangered themselves through extreme sports, unsafe sexual activity, substance use or criminal behaviour.

Parenting a teenager is far from easy. If we were strict in order to keep our child safe, they may have defied our rules, whether

openly or secretly. Arguments may have been frequent as they battled for increased freedom and we held firm to the house rules. Alternatively, our teenage child may have been quiet and reserved. Perhaps they stayed increasingly in their room, and we worried that they had become too isolated. We may have struggled to bring them out of themselves.

Teenagers often do not confide in their parents. This is part of the natural process of growing up and becoming more independent. We may not always be aware of the issues our children struggle with – for example, their gender identity, or being the victim of bullying. Now that they have died, we might discover these previously hidden strands of their life. We might feel deep sadness and frustration about all the things we might have done to help, and all of the conversations we can have no longer.

## Our grief

Any parent who is bereaved of a child will go through a tumult of strong emotions of grief, including anger and despair. Sometimes we may direct these feelings at others, as we feel the need to place blame even where 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? Was I too strict or too easy-going? 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. While it is natural to seek to blame ourselves, others or circumstances, this will not change what has happened.

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, and most likely our child's school as well. Relaying the news will be an incredibly difficult task. If we are a lone parent, we may be dealing with the emotional and practical consequences of the death of our child with little 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.

Grief can be a lonely experience. Our adult social circle may change; perhaps we will no longer meet up with parents at school functions, sports and other social events. If our child had been bullied or had a negative experience of school, our contact with other parents may have been limited or strained already, and now even more so.

## **The circumstances of our child's death**

The death of our child is a tragedy. It may have been preceded by months, years or even a lifetime of illness or disability, or it may have been completely sudden and unexpected – perhaps the result of suicide, an accident, or a sudden health emergency. Any of these circumstances will leave us with many unanswered questions. Incidents of self-harm or suicide are tragically high amongst young people today. Sometimes this might have been precipitated by problems of which we were unaware, such as bullying, either in person or on social media. If we believe our child's death could have been avoided, perhaps through better medical care, we may feel a deep sense of anger and frustration.

There can be other causes of sudden death. Many young people are drawn to thrills and danger. Activities such as mountain

climbing, sky-diving and motor-biking are just some of the activities available to older children. They may also experiment with drugs or alcohol. Risk-taking is a common human behaviour – particularly amongst teenagers – and in many cases no-one, including ourselves or our child, is to blame when a tragedy occurs.

Even if we know our child's death was an unforeseeable accident, we still might feel guilty, turning over in our minds the things we could have said or done that might have saved them. It is important to be kind to ourselves. We often judge ourselves much more harshly than we do others in similar circumstances.

## If we have other children

There is no easy way to tell our other children that their sibling has died, but it is vital we do so as soon as possible. While we may want to protect them from the details, and we will adapt our explanation according to their age and maturity, we should bear in mind that they will probably find out what happened very soon through other sources. This is particularly so if our child's death was sudden, such as in the case of suicide or an accident, or if they were a victim of violence. Stories about our child's death may become common knowledge extremely quickly, whether through gossip, social or mainstream media. It is better for our other children to hear the news from us first.

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. 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. 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 at school or college, we will need to inform the establishment of what has happened. We may want to talk with their teacher or another staff member about their return to education. It is quite likely that their schoolwork or behaviour will be affected by the death of their sibling, and they might need extra support. If we cannot face talking to the teacher, perhaps a friend or relative could help, or the situation explained in an email or a phone call. Whilst important and necessary, we need to approach these tasks in a way that is right for us.

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](http://www.cruse.org.uk/Children/children-understanding-death)**.

## **Our child's belongings and personal space**

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’s digital footprints

Our child’s Facebook page, Instagram account, Twitter feed, blog or website may contain a host of happy memories and precious insights into our child. At a more personal level, they will probably have sent many individual messages via accounts such as WhatsApp or email.

We may feel that we want to preserve every word, photo and video our child has posted online. It may, however, be worth pausing before we step too deeply into their digital world to ask the types of question that we might consider before reading our child’s diary, such as, are we prepared to uncover things that might cause us additional grief? Perhaps we should also consider whether our

child would have wanted us to read their private communications. To help us make the right decision, it may be helpful to consult their closest friends; if our child has siblings, we may wish to consult them too. Another important factor to bear in mind is the privacy of those our child communicated with online.

There may be situations when we wish to close our child's social media account – perhaps due to unwanted visitors or hurtful comments. This is a personal decision, and one that should not be taken in haste. However, it may be best to act quickly to at least change the privacy settings of our child's Facebook page to prevent outsiders from viewing photos or making posts on the page. (This is assuming that we have access to the account.) If we decide to delete an account, we may want to download the contents beforehand.

Social media has its disadvantages, but it also holds the potential to bring something positive for us and for the wider circle of our child's family and friends. For example, we may want to consider creating an online memorial of some kind. This could be a JustGiving page, where family and friends can help raise funds for a meaningful cause, or a Facebook page, where people can leave comments or share photos (although the creation of this might result in Facebook quickly 'memorialising' our child's own page).

More information and advice can be found in the TCF leaflet *Our Child, Social Media and Their Digital Legacy*:

**[www.tcf.org.uk/content/r-digital-legacy](http://www.tcf.org.uk/content/r-digital-legacy)**

## Our child's school or college

There will be items belonging to our child at the school or college they attended, such as the work they were doing, books and clothing. We will probably want to arrange to collect any of these



items which are still at the school. If we do not feel ready to do this ourselves, perhaps we could ask a friend to pick them up for us. Hopefully the school will understand that collecting our child's belongings may be very hard for us. It may be a good idea to choose a time and day when we can have time to ourselves afterwards to recover. We may prefer to ask the school to keep the items safely for a while until we feel able to collect them.

In communicating with our child's place of education, we might want to request that a particular teacher – perhaps a form tutor, or someone else who knew our child well – acts as a single point of contact for us over the coming weeks and months. We may need to communicate with the school about a range of issues such as:

- How we would like the school to handle breaking the news and/or explaining the circumstances of our child's death. This might involve calling a special assembly, or placing a statement on the school's website or social media pages.
- We may wish to write a short statement about our child's death 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 an ad-hoc manner. This might be particularly important if our child's death was sudden or unexpected.
- We may or may not wish to involve teachers and pupils in our child's funeral or memorial service; the school may be able to relay this information on our behalf.
- In the immediate aftermath of the death, we may or may not wish to receive messages of condolence from teachers and pupils. The school might be able to gather these messages — possibly in a book of remembrance — to pass on to us whenever we feel ready.

- As time goes on, we may want to enlist the school's help in planning some kind of memorial for our child, such as a special service or assembly, planting a tree, dedicating a bench or a plaque, or establishing a prize or scholarship.

## Our child's friends

Once the initial shock of our child's death has passed, we may begin to think about their friends who are grieving too. Finding ways to engage with our child's friends or to include them in our mourning will require effort on our part, but can also bring us support and comfort. We may recognise in their friends the same qualities we loved in our child: their quirky sense of humour, or their enthusiasm for sport or music. These characteristics may help us to feel closer to our child, although they will also, inevitably, be a painful reminder of what we have lost. We will also need to be sensitive to their lead. Teenagers entering new chapters in their lives may not wish to continue to be in touch with us.

It can be very hard to see our child's friends carrying on with their lives when our child's life has ended. Their milestones, such as changing or leaving school, going to college or university or starting work, can emphasise the fact that our child is not sharing these experiences. At the same time, through this sharing of grief, we may discover that some of our child's friends grow into being our friends too. It can be rewarding in a bittersweet way to witness their journeys into adulthood and parenthood with the knowledge that they too still love and miss our child.

## 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 us and understand the depth of 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. 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" or that our child "was an angel who went to heaven" may not be any comfort. 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. Our child is no longer here, and that is always going to be deeply painful.

Many of us have found that remembrance activities enable us to keep a continued bond with our child, and can be very comforting, though 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 to acknowledge and celebrate our child's life can be helpful in managing the rollercoaster of emotions that we 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.

No matter how much time goes by, we will always be a parent to our child, and we will always miss them. 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*
- *Our Child's Digital Legacy*
- *Our Surviving Children*
- *Our Children's Friends*
- *Remembering Our Child (Leaflet and Handbook)*
- *After Suicide*
- *Grieving for a Disabled Child*

This leaflet is for children in the 11-18 year age group. For other ages, see:

- *Grieving for Our Baby*
- *Grieving for Our Young Child*
- *The Death of an Adult Child*

TCF leaflets can be read and downloaded at this link:

**[www.tcf.org.uk/leaflets](http://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 Compassionate Friends

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This leaflet is sponsored by parents Antony & Brenda Lawson, the founders of The Jessica Lawson Foundation. Dedicated to their bright & beautiful daughter Jessica. "Forever Twelve"

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