

# Bereavement Support For Parents

## Gone Way Too Soon...Coping With a Child's Death

"Parents are not supposed to bury their children," David cried out. "This is not how it's supposed to be." You likely identify with this dad, expressing the shock, disbelief and grief of a child's death. Whether in an unexpected car crash, through suicide or after a lengthy illness, the death of a child turns the world upside down. Regardless of whether the "child" is a toddler, a teenager or a middle-aged parent herself, a child's death upsets the "natural order" of life.

A big part of the grief process for parents is described as a "search for meaning." In early grief, finding meaning in a child's death is an impossible task, and for some, no sense is ever made of the death. Eventually, though, most bereaved parents, family members and friends do find meaning in the loss-or at least in spite of it. You might embrace a cause to prevent other families from experiencing the same tragedy or fondly recall the rich living crammed into a few short years by a young person gone too soon. You may eventually find a depth to your own strength or vitality in your faith you never knew existed.

### The Child's Siblings and Friends

Siblings and friends of the child who has died need an extra measure of patience and support and there are many practical ways friends and family members can provide help. Though parents desire to shield surviving children from the pain, and even if the other children have not been told what happened, siblings sense the tension in the family, realizing intuitively, "something is wrong." When they do not get honest information about their brother or sister, they sometimes erroneously conclude that parents are upset because of their actions.

### The Child's Grandparents

Grandparents also experience the loss deeply. In the words of author and bereaved grandparent, Mary Lou Reed, "Grandparents cry twice." Not only must grandparents bear the grief after their grandchild's death, but they also must helplessly witness the intractable pain their own child experiences as the grandchild's now-bereaved parent. If you know a bereaved grandparent, inquire not only about the well-being of the bereaved parents, but also ask how he or she is doing, too.

### Your Marriage, Family and Coping

Do not believe common cultural "myths" about parental bereavement. Your marriage is not "doomed," though a child's death does put an unprecedented strain on even the best marriages. And ignore the well-meaning suggestion of friends or family members who suggest something like, "Since you're young, you can have another child." Children can never be replaced, regardless of their age at death.

A child's death is a life-altering event, but for parents and other family members, it does not have to be a life-ending event. Grief shakes us from "top to bottom," leaving no part of life untouched.

### Finding Support

Some bereaved parents want to talk about their loss with a counseling professional, and you can find one at the [Association for Death Education and Counseling](#). In addition, mutual help

groups like [Compassionate Friends](#), [Bereaved Parents of the USA](#), [Rainbows Canada](#) and [Care for the Family](#) provide excellent online resources and links to community-based chapters. Surviving children may also benefit from a bereavement support program. The [National Alliance for Grieving Children](#) provides excellent resources and a searchable database of bereavement programs for children and teens. Learn from others who have walked through parental bereavement. Biographies often include anecdotes about how people have faced the deaths of children. Reading the stories of bereaved parents like [Candy Lightner](#) (Mothers Against Drunk Driving), and [Marc Klaas](#) (Klaas Kid's Foundation) may encourage you in your own journey.

### **Written Resources**

Though you may be unable to concentrate on long books, you may find these helpful:

- How to Survive the Loss of a Child by Catherine Sanders
- The Grieving Garden: Living with the Death of a Child by Suzanne Redfern and Susan K. Gilbert
- Life after the Death of My Son: What I'm Learning by Dennis Apple
- Giving Sorrow Words by Candy Lightner and Nancy Hathaway
- A Grief Unveiled: One Father's Journey Through the Loss of a Child by Gregory Floyd
- When the Bough Breaks: Forever after the Death of a Son or Daughter by Judith Bernstein