

Grieving Parents Need Friends Nearby

by Robbie Wright

The death of a child touches everyone: family, friends, acquaintances. The loss is usually unexpected, seems out of natural sequence and, most of all, reminds us that no one has complete control over life; no one is immune to the possibility of this kind of catastrophe. For many people, this type of death is too painful and frightening to even talk about.

Because dealing with and accepting the death of a child is so difficult, friends and relatives often are unsure what the best ways are to comfort and support grieving parents. Because of the immensity of the tragedy and the fears of inadequacy, many people wonder what, if anything, they can say or do that would help. Some people end up avoiding the parents altogether.

However, there are ways that individuals can assist and comfort bereaved parents. There are also some things, frequently said or done unintentionally, that are not helpful. Some no-nos:

- Don't stay away from the grieving parents. In her book, "The Bereaved Parent," Harriet Sarnoff Schiff writes that "It is most common for friends of a bereaved family to feel the family needs to be alone with its thoughts and hurt. While some privacy is essential, being alone with my thoughts after the funeral was the last thing in the world I needed."
- Avoid clichés or offering advice. Sayings such as, "Time heals," "Your child is better off now," or "Have another baby," are not comforting words to parents who are struggling with such a painful loss. What they need is your kindness and your understanding; not suggestions or platitudes. A simple, "I'm so very sorry" is a better way to convey your condolences.
- Don't underestimate the intensity of the grief if the child is an infant. In the book "Giving Sorrow Words," author Candy Lightner writes, "The grief that follows the death of a baby is intense, but many people may not recognize its depth or length. And they assume that since you didn't have the baby too long, you can't mourn too long."
- Don't tell the grieving parents, "I know just how you feel." Many people have experienced the death of a friend, parent or relative. Yet each experience is different. Even another parent who has had a child die cannot presume to know exactly what the bereaved parents are feeling. Comparing grief or suggesting there are worse situations only makes the parents feel discounted and unrecognized in their own mourning. Candy Lightner suggests using the phrase, "I share your pain," rather than "I know how you feel."
- Finally, do not expect bereaved parents to return to a normal life quickly. Most parents feel they lose a big part of their own life and their future when their child dies. They grieve for the ages, the stages, and all the things that will never come to be for their child. It can be a long, difficult process. Don't expect them to bounce back in weeks, months, or a year.

Recommended ways to help:

- Be a sensitive listener. Bereaved parents have a mental tape of their child's death that goes around and around in their heads. Talking about what happened, as well as about the grieving process itself, often helps them work through their pain.
- Provide comfort through touch. Sometimes words are just too difficult. Give a hug, put an arm around the parent's shoulder, or quietly hold her or his hand.
- Talk about the child. Speaking of the child by name, and talking about him or her does not remind parents that their child is dead. They are already continually aware of their loss. It does tell them that their child was important to you that he or she did exist and has not been forgotten.
- Reach out in more ways than just offering condolences. Daily tasks can seem overwhelming to grieving parents. Others can help by running errands, shopping for groceries, bringing by a meal, doing yard work or housework, or babysitting, if there are other children.
- Give support to both parents. It's common, especially when an infant or a young child dies, for the mother more support and attention. Fathers are frequently considered the "strong one" and expected to handle what needs to be done.
- Remember holidays, birthdays and the anniversary of the death, which are especially difficult days for parents. Depression is common around these dates.
- Provide names of local resources. Some parents find it very comforting to be with other parents in similar situations. Many communities have bereavement support groups, such as the Compassionate Friends. The local library or hospital will often have this information.

"The function of friends is to be the sounding board for grief," Schiff writes in "The Bereaved Parent." This is true. The best way to help bereaved parents is to listen, to accept the flood of feelings that arise, and most of all to be patient as the parent slowly begins the healing process.

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