



## The Compassionate Friends Victoria, Australia

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### How Can I Help When a Child Dies?

A child has died. Regardless of the child's age or the circumstances of death, you feel empty and helpless. What can you say that will ease the pain and help mend the hurt?

#### WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP?

There are no easy answers, no standard approaches that are universally helpful. There are no magic formulas, which will make the pain go away. It is natural to feel helpless when the child of a friend or relative dies. Remember that showing your loving concern can be very comforting to a grieving family. Please don't avoid them because you feel inadequate. Families are more likely to reach a healthy, positive resolution of their grief if they receive continuing support and understanding.

#### The following suggestions may help you provide that support:

**Don't try to find magic words that will take away the pain.** There aren't any. A hug, a touch and a simple, "I'm so sorry," offer real comfort and support.

**Don't be afraid to cry.** Your tears are a tribute to both child and parents. Yes, the parents may cry with you, but their tears can be a healthy release.

**Avoid saying, "I know how you feel."** It is very difficult to comprehend the depth of the loss when a child dies and to say you do may seem presumptuous to the parents.

**Avoid using, "It was God's will," and other clichés that attempt to minimize or explain the death.** Don't try to find something positive in the child's death, such as, "At least you have other children." There are no words that make it all right that their child has died.

**Listen! Let them express the anger, the questions, the pain, the disbelief and the guilt they may be experiencing.** Understand that parents often have a need to talk about their child and the circumstances of the death over and over again. It may be helpful to encourage them to talk by asking a gentle question such as, "Can you tell me about it?"

**Avoid judgments of any kind.** "You should..." or "You shouldn't..." is not appropriate or helpful. Decisions and behaviours related to displaying or removing photographs, reliving the death, idealizing the child, or expressing anger, depression or guilt may appear extreme in many cases. These behaviour patterns are normal, particularly in the first years following the child's death.

**Be aware that, for parents with religious convictions, their child's death may raise serious questions about God's role in this event.** Do not presume to offer answers. If the parents raise the issue, it would be better to listen and allow them to explore their own feelings. They will need to arrive at an individual philosophy about this.

**Be there.** Run errands, help with household chores, provide child care and help in whatever way is needed. Don't say, "Call me if there is anything I can do." That call will probably never come. Be aware of what needs to be done and offer to do specific tasks.

**Give special attention to surviving children.** They are hurt, confused and often ignored. Don't assume they are not hurting because they do not express their feelings. Many times siblings will suppress their grief to avoid adding to their parents' pain. Talk to them and acknowledge their loss.

**Mention the name of the child who has died.** Don't fear that talking about the child will cause the parents additional pain. The opposite is usually true. Using the child's name lets parents know that they are not alone in remembering their child.

**Be patient.** Understand that grieving families respond differently to their pain. Some verbalize, others may seem unable or unwilling to talk, some withdraw and others strike out angrily.

**Share a fond memory of the child.** "I remember when she..." or "He had a wonderful gift for..." can be reassuring to parents that you appreciated their child and are aware of their sense of loss. Relate amusing anecdotes about the child. Don't be afraid of laughter. It helps to heal the hurt.

**Remember the family on important days such as the child's birthday and death anniversary.** Send a card, call or visit. Let them know you remember, too.

**Gently encourage a return to outside activities.** Suggest a lunch or movie as relief from the isolation of grief. If your invitation is declined, don't give up! Ask again and again, if necessary. The third or fourth time you call may be just the day that an outing would be most welcome if someone takes the initiative.

**There is no standard timetable for recovery.** Grief usually lasts far longer than anyone expects. Encourage bereaved families to be patient with themselves. They often hear, "Get on with your life; it's time you got over this!" Those demands are unfair and unrealistic. When parents express concern about being tired, depressed, angry, tearful, unable to concentrate or unwilling to get back into life's routines, reassure them that grief work takes time and that they may be expecting too much of themselves too soon.

**Be sensitive to the changes a bereaved family experiences.** Family members will adopt new behaviours and roles as they learn to live without the child. This is a painful and lengthy process. Don't expect your friends to be unchanged by this experience.

**Refer a grieving family to The Compassionate Friends.** There may be a chapter near them, ready to offer support, friendship and understanding.

**Continue your contact with the family.** Grief does not end at the funeral or on the first anniversary. Stay in touch-often-and don't forget to mention the name of the child who died in conversation as easily as you would the name of any other member of the family.