

How you can help bereaved parents

Written by parents for parents

We've spoken with many parents who have lost a child at different times of life and in varying circumstances. We listened as they told us what helps, and what doesn't help. Here's what they would love you to know.

✓ DO

- ✓ **Do** talk to us – even if you don't know what to say. Knowing that you are sorry about our loss is a good start.
- ✓ **Do** keep in touch – keep phoning, especially as weeks turn into months and years. Be available.
- ✓ **Do** talk about those we have lost – we love to hear your memories of them.
- ✓ **Do** listen – it can be more important than what you say. Sometimes we just need to know that we are heard.
- ✓ **Do** give practical support. We're not able to cope with routines at the moment so providing meals, help at home and with our children is vital.
- ✓ **Do** offer specific help – 'I'll pick the children up on Friday, take them out, give them dinner and bring them back at 6pm'.
- ✓ **Do** talk about everyday things that matter as well – we're still interested in you and what is going on around us, but small talk can seem very trivial.
- ✓ **Do** treat couples as individuals; we may be grieving in different ways.

✗ DON'T

- ✗ **Don't** avoid us – it hurts so much when you cross the road when you see us coming, rather than being willing to face us.
- ✗ **Don't** phone and just say, 'Let me know if I can help'.
- ✗ **Don't** worry about feeling awkward – be normal, yourself, our friend – we are still the same people.
- ✗ **Don't** say things like, 'You can always have another child'. Loved ones are not replaceable.
- ✗ **Don't** wait to be asked to help – initially there is so much help we need with just about everything.
- ✗ **Don't** overload us with responsibilities – for a while it will be all we can cope with to get out of bed and get dressed.
- ✗ **Don't** ignore the loss, or avoid asking about our child. Most bereaved people long to talk and talk about the loved one who has died.
- ✗ **Don't** be afraid to show your emotions – cry with us and tell us how you feel.

✓ DO

- ✓ **Do** give us space to be as we are, tears and all. Don't try to discourage our tears and please be willing to cry with us too.
- ✓ **Do** be sensitive and aware, for example when writing us Christmas cards – a mention of our child will let us know that you miss them at this time too.
- ✓ **Do** remember the men! They can sometimes be neglected as they may not be so willing to talk.
- ✓ **Do** take special care of those of us who parent alone. We have no one to measure ourselves against to see how we're doing.
- ✓ **Do** make allowances for our children's behaviour. It may be very disruptive and difficult. They need lots of patience and love.
- ✓ **Do** still invite us to events and parties, but understand if sometimes we feel unable to go or have to leave early.
- ✓ **Do** remember that appearances can be deceptive – we may look as if we're coping OK, but inside we may be falling apart.
- ✓ **Do** find ways to remember the anniversaries that the family will appreciate. Be creative – we appreciate other people's ideas.
- ✓ **Do** be aware that our children may react in ways that seem out of character – they have gone through the worst experience imaginable and may be very frightened and insecure.

cff.org.uk/bps
029 2081 0800
mail@cff.org.uk

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✗ DON'T

- ✗ **Don't** be super-spiritual, feel you need to pray with us, or have to defend God's case.
- ✗ **Don't** expect us to be over it – we will never get over it but we will find a 'new normal' in time.
- ✗ **Don't** say, 'Be strong' – we hear it as 'Don't share your pain, keep it to yourself'.
- ✗ **Don't** assume that because we seem to be coping, we don't need your help. We have no choice but to keep the family going.
- ✗ **Don't** forget to give time and attention to our children – we may be struggling with our feelings towards them.
- ✗ **Don't** avoid the issue with us just because there are other people around – at the school gate, in church or at work.
- ✗ **Don't** ask how we are if you only want to hear 'I'm OK, thank you.' Be prepared for the truth!
- ✗ **Don't** assume that losing our child will draw us closer together as a couple. We each need your support and your help in our relationship.
- ✗ **Don't** try to give us answers – it is unlikely that you will have any that will satisfy us. Just allow us to express all our fears, questions and doubts.

