

Supporting parents after bereavement

Supporting my family



What helped us...

Supporting my family

“After our daughter died, it felt like a ship sinking... Each of us grabbed a life buoy and held on tight. Sometimes we floated together, then there would be a big wave that would separate us. In time, though, our family did find our way to shore.”

Each family member is different

When a child in the family dies, everyone in that family is affected in different ways. Each person had a different relationship with the child: mum, dad, older sibling, younger sibling, twin and extended family such as grandparents, aunts and uncles. Each will grieve in their own way.

A child will also have to adjust to their new place or role in the family following the death of a sibling. The middle child, for example, may now find herself as eldest or youngest; or your son may now be the only living child.

As an adult in that family your first concern is often for the other

children. How will they cope? Are they traumatised? How can I best help them?

“You can feel like your family is disintegrating before you, and it’s such a frightening place to be in. It just doesn’t feel normal, but it is normal; it’s part of the grieving process. But you don’t know that at the time.”

Siblings

Depending on the age of your other children, they will have a different understanding of loss and death. They may fear that it could also happen to them or to you, their parent. They may feel anger or resentment towards their

sibling for 'leaving' them. They might feel guilty for not being nicer to their sibling when they had the chance.

"The children get affected and you have to get your head around their understanding, and that the way they think about death is totally different to you. It's a challenging journey. It certainly made us stronger and it did ultimately bind us stronger together – but in the beginning it rips you apart."

Often children try to protect their parents by not speaking about their sibling in case it might upset them, so it is vital that you open conversations and keep listening. Answer any questions as openly and honestly as you can, in language they will understand.

Don't be afraid to use words like 'died', rather than saying 'gone to sleep'. It will avoid confusion and fear with younger children. Also, never presume that even a very young baby or toddler is unaffected by the change in your mood or atmosphere in the home. Often you will notice changes in their behaviour, routine or sleep patterns.

Teenagers

Each sibling's grief will be different because of the unique relationship they had with their brother or sister. If their behaviour changes, be aware that it may stem from the pain of their loss and their adjustment to the new reality without their sibling.

Remember also that older teenage children have all the usual teenage anxiety to cope with as well as the loss of their brother or sister.

School

If you have other children in school, stay in touch with their school. Teachers' insights into your child's behaviour and how they are coping may be very useful. Some schools may offer access to bereavement support through organisations such as ICBN (Irish Childhood Bereavement Network). It can be helpful, especially for teenage children, to speak to someone not connected to the family, if necessary.

Adult siblings

Please see our booklet 'Adults grieving the death of a brother or sister'.

Don't be afraid to show emotion

Don't be afraid to show that you are upset and that you too miss the child who has died. Talking regularly about them won't upset the family more, but it will help everyone to feel connected and supported.

Remember that young children often live in the moment and that for them, grief can come and go. It is important that they are still allowed to show excitement or happiness or joy when receiving a present or winning a match or just going out with friends.

Anam Cara parents make the following suggestions about ways to support a grieving child.

"We found it best just to sit or lie and listen and let the child speak or cry as a way to let the grief come out. It is important to remember that it is the child's time and chance to let go of feelings and pain inside. It can happen at any time, but often at night when going to or in bed and when everyone is tired. It is a painful process, especially at the beginning, but it is helpful to encourage your child to express their feelings. Doing this over and over again will give a release and a sense of comfort and support. This will help to strengthen him or her to carry on and continue day-to-day living with school life, sports, social life – and help them to enjoy life again."

"We say to him that in life bad things happen all the time and to lots of people, but it is important to look around and see the good things in life and the people in his life who are still there and who love and support him. We emphasise that we are still a family."

Mums and dads are different

Mums and dads can sometimes grieve in very different ways. In the early days and months following the loss of your child, it is important not to judge your

partner and his or her reactions to their loss. There may be very different views about things like:

- funeral arrangements;
- a memorial;
- having people over to the house;
- how sociable each parent is feeling;
- when to return to work; or
- how you remember your child.

The months following the death of a child can be full of tension between parents, as each handles their own emotions as well as those of their partner. Resentment and arguments can build very quickly. This can leave one or both parents feeling isolated from the very person they expected to support them.

Be aware also that if you or your partner suffered a traumatic loss in the past, emotion from this loss may surface at this time.

Parents at Anam Cara had the following experiences

"I wanted to talk all the time, but my partner never wanted to talk about what had happened."

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"I thought my husband had never cried. Later he told me that he had often cried driving around between jobs. I was surprised but relieved...I knew then that he was working it out in his own way."

"I really wanted to get back to work, but my wife couldn't understand how I could want this so soon after. It wasn't that I didn't miss our daughter, I just wanted to get back to a routine."

Everyone's grief is unique

During this time it is essential to remember that everyone's grief and their response to it is unique. Your role as

mum or dad to your child who died has changed forever, and your hopes and dreams for your child's future have been shattered.

Try to be kind to yourself and to each other. Show respect and sensitivity for your partner's wishes, beliefs and actions, even if you do not feel the same way.

Keep talking to each other and accept that it is okay to grieve in different ways. Each of you is coping as best you can. Though it may be impossible to believe, you won't always feel the way you do today. As time passes we grow stronger and more resilient.

Anam Cara is an all-Ireland organisation providing online and face-to-face peer support services to bereaved parents. The death of a child of any age and through any circumstances is devastating.

Everyone in the family will deal differently with their grief and may need different types of support. Initially that support will be your extended family, friends or a professional.

However, as time passes, know that groups like Anam Cara are available to provide a safe and comfortable place for you to access information and speak to other bereaved parents.

Visit our website to view the Anam Cara Information Videos. These involve interviews with bereaved parents and include a video on 'The Grieving Family'.

We would like to thank the parents associated with Anam Cara South Dublin for their contribution to this leaflet.



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