

## Why is a Parent's Loss Different?

Parents suffer multiple losses when their child dies. Their primary loss is that of the child and the unique individual they were in life. The child's absence represents much more. Parents will also be grieving other losses which include:

- The loss of a sense of self, physically, emotionally and spiritually
- A loss of role (as parent)
- Their connection to the future
- Their expectations and ambitions for the child
- The child's treasured qualities and talents
- A source of love and acceptance
- A loss of a sense of power and control over what happens to them in life
- A loss of social status (as a parent) and social contacts (with other parents)



*Take care of the wounded souls who are left to grieve their beloved children*

Parent (2001)

## How can we support grieving parents?

The following guidelines can be of use to family, friends and neighbours in supporting bereaved parents:

- Show concern by being there for the family
- Listen more than talking
- Be clear about what you can offer the family e.g. practical help with children etc
- Be considerate of their needs. Ask if you don't know their needs
- Use the child's name
- Encourage the family to talk about the child
- Avoid meaningless platitudes
- Respect the uniqueness of the family's experience
- Help the family make informed choices
- Pay attention to the brothers and sisters of the dead child
- Encourage the family to share decisions
- Do not underestimate the value of your support
- Get support for yourself - helping a bereaved family can be emotionally exhausting
- A leaflet in this series on **Children's Grief** explains the experience of children following a death.

Regional Suicide Resource Office  
Front Block, St. Patrick's Hospital  
John's Hill, Waterford

Tel: 051 874013

**Published by**  
The Communications Department  
HSE-South  
Reference Number: 05-06-0016



# Grieving the Death of A Child

*The loss of a child will always be painful, for it is in some way a loss of part of the self.*

Beverly Raphael (1989)

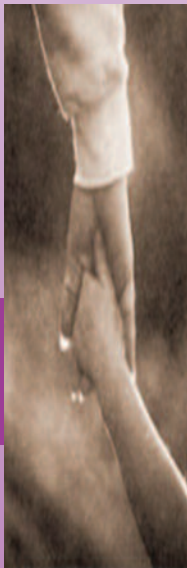
The leaflet **The Grief Process** explains the experience of those who are bereaved. This leaflet explores further issues arising when it is a child who has died.

## Parents Grief

The death of a child is a devastating experience for a parent. It is one of the most difficult blows a person can experience in life. Parents should not put off expressing their feelings. The healthiest time to deal with emotions is when they are first experienced. The loss places extreme stress on all family members and the relationship between the parents is likely to be particularly stressed as partners cope in their own way with the tragedy. The natural family support network may be overwhelmed by the loss and unable to respond to the intense needs of the parents. Many parents complain about a sense of extreme isolation and loneliness. Often comments from those in their social circle can be upsetting and unhelpful. Other parents who have had similar loss may be a good source of support as they have an understanding of the pain of such grief.

*Parents hold their children's hand a while but their hearts forever*

Proverb



*A bereaved parent is often faced with a partner who is also in need of support.*

Iris Dijkstra (2002)

The death of a child can occur at any age. It includes deaths in or around the time of birth, sudden and accidental deaths, death from illness, death from congenital conditions, socially difficult deaths e.g. suicide, murder or drug misuse, and deaths of adult children of ageing parents.

### What is normal?

Most parents who suffer the loss of a child will feel one or more of the following:

- Feel guilty at times
- Get angry with others
- Feel restless and agitated
- Feel as if the loss is unreal
- Sense the child's presence. e.g. hear the child's voice or think they see them
- Wander aimlessly
- Find it difficult to finish a task
- Have difficulty sleeping and dream of their child
- Experience an intense preoccupation with the life of the child
- Carry regrets for things done or not done with the child
- Feel angry with the child for leaving them
- Need to tell and retell their story of the child's death
- Have mood changes

- Cry unexpectedly over little things
- Often feel out of place with other people
- May find themselves ill more often as their resistance to infection is lowered
- May find themselves weary
- May speak of the child in the present tense
- Will consider things that belonged to the child, remain the child's belongings
- May want to protect other children from grief, however it is good to let them see our tears as it models to them a way of grieving.

