

Grieving the Death of a Child

The death of a child is the most difficult experience any parent can face.

With medical advances and technology such as ultrasound, you can establish a very early relationship with your unborn child. A miscarriage or stillbirth deprives you of the opportunity to meet and raise the baby you feel you already know.

Our expectation of having a healthy child and raising that child to adulthood has risen dramatically in recent years. This brings its own difficulties when it comes to grief. While the absence of a child is your primary loss, the loss of the dreams and hopes you held for them may add to your grief.

As time moves on, your grief may be heightened by certain dates and events such as Mother & Father's Days, festivities and family occasions. You will be reminded of your loss as the children of your friends and neighbours reach milestones like their first day at school, 18th birthdays, Leaving Cert results. Simple social questions like "How many children do you have?" can be very difficult and you may agonise over how to answer these questions.

If your only child has died you may feel the loss of identity as 'parent' and the connection to other parents and child-related activities.

What to expect

You may experience a range of emotions as you grieve including numbness and shock, overwhelming and constant pain, anger, depression, irritability, sadness, disbelief, loneliness and guilt. Because grief is also a very physical experience, you may feel exhausted at times, with lower concentration and attention span.

You may experience changes in your eating and sleeping patterns. It's not unusual to have vivid dreams about the child or a belief they have communicated with you and you may or may not find this unexpected or unsettling.

The death of a child can place great stress on the family system. Each family member must grieve and adjust to the death in their own way. Siblings may also feel left out or angry at the child who died. Parents may find it difficult to understand and accept their individual ways of grieving. Families who can accept the differences between each member's grief and how they express it tend to cope better with their loss.

Caring for your other children may feel overwhelming when you are consumed by grief. If you have lost your only child, you may look at other families and feel keenly the lack of the other children. Each family's particular circumstances bring their own losses. It's important for parents to check in with each other to share their grief in order to support each other.

You may feel a need to tell and retell the story of your child's life and death. While this can be painful, it can help you keep a connection to your child. You may find that you distance yourself from people who cannot understand your pain.



How to support bereaved parents

- Acknowledge the death. A short, hand-written note or a simple 'I am so sorry' can mean a lot. It's important you use their child's name when talking or writing to parents.
- Be willing to listen as they talk about their child. It's normal for a bereaved parent to talk about their child and hear their child's name.
- Remember siblings need support too. They are also grieving and may welcome the chance to talk to someone other than their parents.
- Acknowledge birthdays and anniversaries. Just a note or phone call to say you're thinking about them can be much appreciated.
- Respect the family's grief. Don't assume you know what they need. If you want to offer support, ask them how you can help.



Useful Resources

Irish Childhood Bereavement Network

www.childhoodbereavement.ie
icbn@hospicefoundation.ie

AnamCara

www.anamcara.ie

Irish Hospice Foundation

Further suggested reading is available from our Thérèse Brady Library,
library@hospicefoundation.ie

Bereavement & Loss Hub

www.bereaved.ie

Bereavement Support Line

Freephone 1800 80 70 77. Available Monday to Friday, 10am-1pm. In partnership with the HSE.

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