



*For friends
and family*





Children's Hospital Colorado

We have assembled this guide to help you support your friend or family member following the loss of his or her child. Use this booklet to help you understand what your friend or family member is experiencing, and what you may be feeling as well.

With any death, the bereaved depend on support from close friends and family members to help make decisions and arrangements, and to take care of daily activities.

Below, we list parents'/guardians' duties in the hours and days following the loss – this is where you can help. Although it is up to the parents/guardians on how they complete these tasks, encourage them to let you help; some people may not feel comfortable asking for help.

We provided a more detailed version of this list for the parents/guardians to help them through the first day and week after the death. It might be a good idea to reference their booklet as well and listen carefully to what they want.

You can help with parents'/guardians' tasks following the loss

Parents'/guardians' first day tasks:

- Choose a funeral home or hospital placement.
- Inform a staff person of the funeral home or option chosen.
- Surround yourself with loving people who let you be yourself.
- Take the time you need to be with your loved one.

Parents'/guardians' first week tasks:

- Make arrangements for the service, gathering, final resting place and other matters.
- Make a list of immediate family, close friends, and employer or business colleagues and notify them.
- Arrange for family members or close friends to answer the door, phone or emails, and to keep careful records of calls, visits, and items delivered/received.
- Arrange appropriate care of the child's pet, if there are any.
- Make sure to plan meals for the next few days.
- Consider special needs of the household, like cleaning and paying bills.
- Write the obituary.
- If you do not want flowers, decide on the appropriate memorial to which gifts may be made, such as a school or charity.
- Arrange hospitality for visiting relatives and friends.
- Select pallbearers and notify them (if you are having a funeral with a casket).
- If having a service, prepare content for printed programs for services, if you would like a program.
- If there are flowers, plan for their placement after the service(s).
- Send thank you cards.



How to reach out and communicate

The death of a baby or child is a deep, lasting tragedy. It changes the lives of the child's parents and your life as well.

Parents may have sadness and depression for a long time. They may experience an outburst of anger, be afraid of going crazy, or have deep feelings of guilt and fear.

People grieve in all kinds of ways. Remember that if and when they display a wide range of extreme emotions, they need your patience and support.

Knowing there will be a wide range of emotions for a long time may help you accept the parents' feelings and relate to them better. This is a time when they need your love, your caring and most of all, your acceptance.

It's often difficult for friends and family to allow parents to experience things in their own way, but your job as a support person is never to critique someone else's grief.

- **Take the first step.** Even if you are a close family member or friend, the first time you see/visit with the parents following their loss may be difficult.
- **Call them.**
- **Send a sympathy card.** It helps to know you cared about their child and that you care about them.
- **Hug them.** If words aren't easy, try giving a hug, placing your hand on their back, or holding their hand. People in grief often need much more physical comfort than usual.
- **Call the child by name** (even if was a baby that they named after the death).
- **Encourage the parents to share.** Journey with the other in the search for meaning. Trust the other to lead you.



Tell them you care. Acknowledge what has happened. Respond in an authentic way. Accept the other as he or she is.

- 
- **Share your own memories of the child and/or pregnancy.** The worst feeling for parents is when people act as though their child never existed. Carry the other in your heart.
 - **Let them know you respect their thoughts and feelings** even if they are not grieving or feeling exactly as you think they should. Allow the other his or her privacy. Simply be there for them.
 - **If there are other children, encourage them to talk about their brother or sister.** Let them show you a favorite toy or picture that belonged to the child who died. Let them talk, or sit with them if they are not ready to talk.
 - **Listen.** This is probably the most important thing you can do. Letting them talk and encouraging them to “tell me more” or “go on” will let them know you are interested and supportive. Preaching and telling them how they should feel are definitely not helpful. Sometimes we think there must be something we can say to make people feel better. Talking about “God’s will” or saying the death was “for the best” is more likely to generate anger than appreciation. Probably one of the best statements is a simple “I’m sorry.” Radiate genuine hope.
 - **Cry if you feel the need.** Lots of times we think crying will make the parents feel worse. This isn’t true. It helps them to share tears. Open yourself to what this experience holds for you.
 - **Remember the dad.** He is often the forgotten griever and left with busy work and making arrangements, but he is grieving too, even if it’s not in a way you recognize.
 - **Be practical.** In addition to sending cards and calling, there are other ways you can help. Bring food, clean the house, take one or both of the parents shopping (the first trip to the grocery store can be hard), do laundry, care for pets, or water plants. Right now it takes a lot of energy just to keep going. So, even helping care for the other children can be a big help.

What do the bereaved want?

What might be going through their minds? Bereaved parents share their thoughts and wishes about what has happened and how friends and family can support them.

- I wish my child hadn't died.**
- Don't be afraid to speak my child's name.** My child lived and was very important to me. I need to hear that my child was important to you too.
- You won't hurt me if I become emotional when you talk about my child.** I cry because my child died. You have talked about my child, and you have allowed me to share my grief. I thank you for both.
- It hurts me when you remove my child's pictures, artwork, or other remembrances from your home.**
- Don't shy away from me. I need you now more than ever.**
- Allow me to talk about my child,** even if it seems like it's too much. I need diversions, so I do want to hear about you; but I also want you to hear about me.
- Let me know about the times you think and pray for me.**
- Tell me how my child's death has affected you.**
- Don't expect my grief to be over in six months;** my grief will never be over. I will forever live with the death of my child.
- Don't expect me to "not think about it" or to "be happy."** Neither will happen for a very long time.
- My life has shattered.** I know it is miserable for you to be around me when I'm feeling miserable. Please be as patient with me as I am with you.



- **My expressions of grief are normal.** Depression, anger, frustration, hopelessness, and overwhelming sadness are some of the many emotions to expect. Please excuse me when I'm quiet and withdrawn or irritable and cranky.
- **Taking things one hour at a time is all I can handle right now.**
- **Excuse me if I seem rude** – it is not my intent. Sometimes the world around me goes too fast and I react. When I walk away, let me find a quiet place to spend time alone.
- **I am not the same person I was before my child died, and I will never be that person again.**
- **I hope you never have to go through this experience.**
- **Reacting to death reminds people of their own death.** Be aware of how this makes you feel about your immortality. Sometimes people don't acknowledge that and it leads to thoughtless or insensitive remarks that can really hurt.



Children's Hospital Colorado

Anschutz Medical Campus
13123 East 16th Avenue
Aurora, Colorado 80045

childrenscolorado.org