

Here is a suggestion for how you can help children. You may want to cut this out and post it on the refrigerator door for everyone:

“The Three T’s”

Touching. Tender touching says, I love you and I care. Everyone in your family needs to be touched and held. Children especially need to be hugged, held and cuddled. Strong arms feel secure when your world is falling apart. A three minute hug is a good idea.

Tears. Everyone needs to be able to cry and know it’s OK. Your children need to know they don’t have to be afraid of tears.

Talking. All of you need to talk. Listen to your kids. They’ll have some big questions like: Did I do something to cause the death? Is this going to happen to me, or my mom or dad? Who is going to take care of me? Let them know they are not to blame, other people aren’t likely to die and that there will always be someone to love and care for them.

Other Suggestions

- ✘ One family burns a special candle on all their special days to remember their absent child.
- ✘ One mother buys a poinsettia for her home as a living memorial to her son.
- ✘ If the thought of sending greeting cards is simply too painful when you know that some of your friends are still unaware of the death of your child. Try this suggestion: enclose the funeral card inside the greeting card. People have found the response from friends is most helpful.
- ✘ If you and your family can’t bear the idea of hanging a stocking, but find it equally difficult not to hang one, you might try hanging one and filling it with messages, special wishes or fresh flowers. You may want to take the stocking or the flowers to the cemetery later or press them in a keepsake book after the holiday.
- ✘ Here are some suggestions if you or your family are finding it difficult to put up a tree or do any decorating: try putting the tree or decorations, up at a different time than you usually do and letting the children, relative, or friends decorate.

Final Thoughts

Don’t forget that comforting discovery that many people have confirmed – the realization that when that special day arrives, it truly is not as bad, by any means, as you had anticipated.

Our wish for you is that you find yourself facing the holidays without a sense of helplessness, but with a measure of hopefulness for the new year ahead.

Handling the Holidays

One of the most painful issues for you to deal with is how to survive the holidays after the death of the person you loved. Because holidays are supposed to be family times, and because of the extraordinary (although unrealistic) expectation that you should feel close to everyone this time of year can underscore the absence of your child more than any other time. The important thing to remember is that you and your family do have options about how to cope with the holidays. These are a few things to keep in mind:

- ✘ As much as you’d like to skip from November to January 2nd, this is impossible. Therefore, it will be wise for you to take control of the situation by facing it squarely and planning for what you do and do not want to do to get through this time.
- ✘ Realize that the anticipation of pain at the holidays is often worse than the actual day.
- ✘ Recognize that what you decide for this year can be changed next year; you can move to something new or back to the old way. Decide what is right for you and your family now. Don’t worry about all the other holidays to come in years ahead. You will be at a different place in your mourning and in your life then. Recognize, also, that your distress about the holidays is normal. Countless other bereaved people have felt, and do feel, as you do right now.
- ✘ Ask yourself and loved ones to decide what is important for you to make your holidays meaningful and bearable. Then, through compromise and negotiations, see if everyone can get a little of what he or she wants and needs. Give-and-take is important here.
- ✘ Do something symbolic. Think about including ritual that can appropriately symbolize your memory of your loved one. For example, a candle burning at dinner, the hanging of a special Christmas ornament, or the planting of a tree on New Year’s Day may help you to commemorate the life of your child while still celebrating the holiday with those you love who still survive. Remembering your child in this fashion can make an important statement to yourself and others.
- ✘ Recognize that the holidays are filled with unrealistic expectations for intimacy, closeness, relaxation, and joy for all people – not just for the bereaved. Try not to buy into this for yourself – you already have enough to contend with.
- ✘ Be aware of the pressures, demands, depression, increased alcohol intake, and fatigue that come with holidays. As a bereaved person you may feel these more than others. Take time out to take care of yourself during this time. You will need it even more.

- ✘ Re-evaluate family traditions. Ask yourself and your surviving loved ones whether you need to carry on with them this year or whether you should begin to develop some new ones. Perhaps you can alter your traditions slightly so that you can still have them to a certain extent but don't have to highlight your child's absence more than it already is. For example, you may want to have Christmas dinner at someone else's house instead of yours. Or you might open presents on Christmas Eve instead of Christmas morning.
- ✘ Recognize that your child's absence will cause pain no matter what you do. This is only natural and right. After all, you are mourning because you love and miss this person. Try to mix this with your love for those you still have and your positive memories of the past. "Bittersweet" is a good word to describe the bitterness of your child's absence. Together they can give you a full, rich feeling, marked with love for those present those who are gone and whom you will never forget.
- ✘ Plan ahead for your shopping tasks. Make a list ahead of time. Then, if you have a good day, capitalize on it and do what shopping you can. Try to consolidate the stores you want to visit. If you have trouble with shopping right now do your shopping by catalogue or mail order, or ask friends to help you out.
- ✘ Tears and sadness do not have to ruin the entire holiday for you or for others. Let yourself have the cry you need and you will be surprised that you can go on again until the next time you need to release the tears. Facing family holidays in your child's absence is a normal mourning experience and part of the healing process. Let your tears and sadness come and go throughout the whole day if necessary. The tears and emotions you do not express will be the ones which are destructive to you.
- ✘ Ask for what you want or need from others during the holidays. One bereaved mother said that, as appropriate, she wanted to hear her deceased daughter mentioned. She knew everyone was thinking of her and wanted them to share their thoughts.
- ✘ You may find yourself reminiscing about other holidays you shared with your deceased child. This is normal. Let the memories come. Talk about them. This is part of mourning and doesn't stop just because it is a holiday. In fact, the holidays usually intensify it.
- ✘ Having some fun at the holidays does not mean you don't miss your child. It is not a betrayal. You must give yourself permission to have joy when you can, just like you must give yourself permission to mourn when you have the need.
- ✘ You may have to let your limits be known to concerned others who are determined not to let you be sad or alone. Let others know what you need and how they can best help you. Don't be forced into doing

things you don't want to do or don't feel up to solely to keep others happy. Determine what and how much you need, and then inform others.

- ✘ Discuss holiday tasks and responsibilities that must be attended to – for example, preparing meals, doing the shopping, decorating the house. Consider whether they should be continued, reassigned, shared or eliminated. Break down your goals into small, manageable pieces that you can accomplish one at a time. Don't overwhelm or over commit yourself. The holidays are stressful times for everyone, not just the bereaved, so you will need to take it slowly and easily.
- ✘ Look at your plans and ask what they indicate. Are you doing what you want or are you placating others? Are you isolating yourself from support or are you tapping into your resources? Are you doing things that are meaningful or are you just doing things?
- ✘ Do something for someone else. Although you may feel deprived because of the loss of your child, reaching out to another can bring you some measure of fulfillment. For example, give a donation in your child's name. Invite a guest to share your festivities. Give food to a needy family.
- ✘ It may be difficult to express how you are feeling to others, even those close to you.

Children and the Holidays

Children are often able to separate their grief from the joy of the season. This does not mean they don't care, but that they may need to celebrate as a relief from their pain and sadness. Younger children may draw comfort from family traditions and may not want to change anything. Older children and adults may want to change everything because the memories are too painful. Children may need some extra attention at this time. One suggestion for communicating with the members of your family are to ask some open-ended questions:

- ✘ The part I'm looking forward to the most is . . .
- ✘ The part I'm not looking forward to at all is . . .
- ✘ To make the day still feel special to me this year, I think we should . . .
- ✘ This year, I don't want to . . . or I still want to . . .

Give each other choices. Everyone needs to be able to get involved in the activity, just sit back and watch from a distance or to go off alone.