

# HOLD OUT A HAND

'Hold out a Hand' is a Newport-based charity set up to provide support and finance to organisations and charities involved with bereavement. All profits made by the charity go to further its aims - to provide bereavement support

'Hold out a Hand' has two areas of business:

- Providing offices and support to organisations throughout Wales providing bereavement support
- Running commercial businesses such as charity shops and cafes - community-based social enterprises that will meet local needs, be part of the community, and concentrate in particular on assisting the bereaved to donate items belonging to the deceased - often a difficult stage in loss

The charity plays an active role in the community through support of schools and activities for the young - bereavement affects everyone in the community at some stage in their lives and by bringing the subject of loss into the open, together with early involvement with the young in this sensitive area, we hope for major long-term benefits

## Hold out a Hand - and help the bereaved

2 Livingstone Place T: 01633 250119  
Maindee E: [Holdoutahand@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:Holdoutahand@hotmail.co.uk)  
Newport W: [Holdoutahand.co.uk](http://Holdoutahand.co.uk)  
NP19 8EY

Registered Charity No 1118375  
A Company Limited by Guarantee  
No. 6013665  
© Hold out a Hand 2007



Hold out a Hand and Help the Bereaved

# THE LOSS OF A CHILD THE WAY AHEAD



Hold out a Hand  
And Help The Bereaved



The first few days of bereavement for parents of a child who dies at any age are totally bewildering. It is as if life itself has stopped. There are moments of numbness and shock, outbursts of tears and disbelief. It is extremely important for parents to realise that they cannot cope alone with this burden. As personal as the tragedy may be, they need all the support they can get. Hence, it is advantageous to have loved ones around, who can assure the parents that they are cared for.

Parents need to know that it is okay to react in whatever way they feel like at the time. It may be they want to run around caring for visitors and making tea, to cry with friends, to laugh at their memories, to be angry at so many things, or to be alone in the child's bedroom. A child's room can be a safe place and the nearest a parent can feel to the child, surrounded by its clothes, possessions and smells. It is helpful to talk about the events of the death, perhaps over and over again. It is exhausting to talk constantly about the loss, but helpful as it brings home the reality of what has happened

#### THE MONTHS AHEAD.

The days after the funeral often finds a parent left alone. Relatives and friends have returned to work and children gone back to school. From a situation with lot of visitors the house is now strangely silent. A parent is now about to embark on a long trail of coming to terms with reality. One of the hardest tasks for a parent is to accept the loss is real, that their child will not be returning home. It is in the loneliness of one's own home, and the child's possessions all around, that the depth of the pain becomes apparent. The process of coming to terms with such a loss can be so lengthy that parents can only cope by taking each day as it comes.

The more parents acknowledge that they need support over this long period, the easier the passage of time will be. Parents need more than just the close family to help them survive. There is a role for a friend who is willing to listen, while others can assist more practically with tasks and errands such as shopping, ironing and driving the children to activities. Parents seem to feel that they will one day suddenly feel better. However hard work is required if they are to reach a healthy state again.

Practical questions regarding the funeral will need to be answered. I find that parents try to protect children from a funeral in fact children are more than able to face such situations. Surviving children can feel they have let their brother or sister down by not attending the funeral. If a child is to attend the service, than a parent can ease the situation by taking the child into the church a day earlier to acquaint them with the surroundings and explain exactly what will happen, thus removing fears and barriers. Children can actually be of help in arranging a funeral, for they can remember favourite things about their brother or sister which can be incorporated in to the service.

If children are to visit the chapel of rest, they do need to be told what to expect. The experience is far less frightening than parents expect, and in fact it can assist other children to come to terms with the reality that their brother or sister is dead. It helps to let children know that it is all right to cry at a funeral and yet to laugh at the family gathering afterwards. This can be very confusing for a child unless explained. Sometimes families find it helpful for young children to visit the burial place later when all is quiet, just with the parents.

Whatever is decided, children's own views need to be considered. We can so easily put our own fears into them if we are not careful.

Parents can help their surviving children by informing the school of the situation. A sensitive teacher will provide space, both emotionally and practically, for a bereaved child. Some schools even set aside a room where the child can go accompanied by a special teacher

Siblings will still need the support of their parents for years after the death. It helps to be able to talk freely with them about their brother or sister, to remember the good times and the difficult times. Children will feel more secure if they understand their parent's feelings, and know that they can share their thoughts with them, without the fear of making their parents sad and unhappy.

## HOW CHILDREN MIGHT FEEL

In the midst of their own grief it is so easy for parents to fail to perceive the needs of other children in the family. They too are going through the same process as their parents. Indeed a sibling's death raise even more questions for the children.

How should I behave?

Should I cry in public?

When ought I to go back to school?

What is wrong with my parents?

Is this happening to me?

Is it my fault?

What is so important is that parents have an open relationship with their children. Obviously, this is difficult to achieve if relationships are tense through lack of communication even before illness and death enter the home. Difficult relationships in families before death so often seem to become even more problematic afterwards. This is why it is helpful for children to have another adult - grandparent aunt or friend- to support them in their bewilderment when the parents themselves are in a state of shock.

Eventually parents must begin to relate to and support their remaining children with signs of assurance and care. Children's questions cannot be avoided, even if parents feel unsure of the answers. It is far better to say I don't know why than to make up a false story. If parents are able to let children know that they to have fears, but that together they will survive, then it is more likely to lead to a closer family unit. Children of all ages will need advice, especially during the first few days as they encounter death and bereavement for the first time. It is helpful if parents can always make sure children have a safe place to retreat to when the house is besieged by visitors, and that there is an adult free and able to care for them.

This is a dilemma for parents, on one hand they feel like doing nothing except to bury their heads and hide, while at the same time they actually need to work at eating, sleeping getting fresh air etc. This is why they need friends to encourage them. At first, the activity may be small each day, but the more they persevere, the more parents can find themselves performing some duties they would not have expected to do a few months previously. Many parents said they found it beneficial just to get out of the house and walk. The physical activity helps the body, while the mind is free to meander where it will.

It helps to realise that there are things to work at on a regular basis. Having a set time to visit the grave gives a feeling of purpose. Buying something in the name of the remembered child each week can help - for example flowers for the graveside, a plant for the house, a piece of music the child would have liked.

Making a set time to talk to a partner and children can help and can prevent tension from developing when one partner wants to talk, while the other wants to avoid the issue. When one partner is at work and another at home, the meeting point at the end of the day can be fraught. Having a set time each day in which a couple both agree to talk can help. This is also true for children as they will need their questions answered over and over again. The more a family can talk about what they find the hardest at a particular time, the greater the help they can be to each other. It helps for couples to take turns at explaining how they feel. This helps clarify their roles on alternate days - one caring, the other grieving, and visa versa.

A great degree of understanding is required from parents, both in the family and out in the community. At home family members must come to terms with the fact that grief divides and isolates. People grieve in their own way. Where one is depressed and inactive, another may be over active. One wants to talk, while another remains silent. One spends time in the children's bedroom, while another will not venture there. One wants the comfort of touch, while another pushes the partner away. Space to react in your own way requires extra understanding and acceptance of each other. In addition bereaved parents need to understand the reactions of their friends and the community. Unless they seek to understand why people stop visiting and why people cross the road to avoid speaking to them, it can lead to deep resentment and anger.

This is where the role of support groups becomes important. In the first few days of grief the thought of joining a group of parents also in loss can be strange. However as the weeks pass, parents can find a considerable amount of comfort from being with other parents who understand. Hearing one another's stories can be upsetting, yet it can also reveal that you are not alone, and that other people have been where you are and have indeed survived.

As the months progress. Christmas comes and goes, the child's birthday passes and the anniversary of the death approaches. Most parents acknowledge that the fear in anticipating these days proves to be worse than the actual day. It does help to plan such days. You may decide not to celebrate Christmas, or to have only people around you who would not object, regardless of how you feel. On the anniversary of their death you may decide to take a day off work and go to the countryside, or plant a tree. Some parents have to brace themselves for a difficult second year, At least in the first year they can recall what they were doing with the child at the same time last year. But the second year of bereavement takes them further away from the events of the past, which parents do not want to leave. Therefore it is important that parents resolve not to drift through another year. They need to decide positively to bring a degree of order and purpose into the home, Small targets can help It may be;

Working one day a week

Doing some voluntary work

Re- ordering the garden

Taking up writing painting or pottery

Although parents might not want to carry out any activity, the decision to do so can in itself be therapeutic. This does mean they will forget the past - how can they when they are thinking about the child constantly? But it does mean they are managing their loss better.

As the years progress it is helpful for parents to acknowledge positive steps they have taken. The fact that their values in life may have change needs to be affirmed. In the end, the family that keeps working at communications eventually comes through with the fewest scars. A parent will never forget, but can eventually choose to continue with life probably in a very different form.

The road to recovery is a long one for bereaved parents and their children. It is a road they never thought they would be on and they often find no one else travelling their way. It can lead to such enormous changes in their lives that they are never the same again. Society seems to suggest that time will heal. Indeed, they seem to expect this healing to be achieved quickly and without too much change, either for the parents or for themselves. This is just not the case. Time provides a backcloth for healing only if the bereaved are willing and able, with support to tackle their pain and loss.

The parents trust in so many things has been destroyed. The trust that children will always be around is gone. The trust that one's partner and family will understand is clouded. The trust that friends and neighbours care is challenged. The trust that medicine and God will come to the rescue vanishes in smoke. What is left is the will to go on and sustains one's existence. But however weak that seed is in a parent, in the majority, it will begin to grow.

Parents slowly begin to trust afresh, within their circle of family and friends. Reconciliation occurs with those around who never really understood what the parents had been through. The relationships may not be the same, but at least they can begin communicating. The bereaved parents' perspective of life can be radically different from before. Now, they are far more aware of the presence of death around them. They spend their time doing far more what they want to do, rather than follow the crowd. They suffer fools less gladly than before. Gradually, positive growth does take place in their lives and they do recognise this. Generally, the parents become less career-conscious and less materialistic. They become more compassionate with others in loss, and more altruistic.

For most this means reaching a point in their lives where they can enjoy each day afresh, even though they are carrying a wound within them that can never fully heal. Anyone can exist, but parents have endured more pain than just anyone. They have undergone the ultimate tragedy. But they owe it to their selves to want more than a shuffling - along existence, they owe their selves some surefooted living.