

Reactions to the Death of a Stepchild

Grief reactions to the death of a stepchild will vary according to the circumstances of family relationships. A stepparent may have raised the child from early years or even infancy, and feel the loss as acutely as if the child was born to them. A stepparent may have only seen the child on weekends and holidays, but still carry a strong love attachment. If the child only lived with one biological parent, the other parent's spouse may feel quite estranged from the grief process, though witnessing it in his or her partner.

General Grief Symptoms

Whatever the circumstances, it helps to be aware of one's own grief reactions and those of others who loved the child. These, of course, vary according to personalities. Reactions may include:

- incessant crying
- incessant need to talk over the death circumstances
- withdrawal, reluctance to talk
- anger, blame, guilt
- sleeplessness and accompanying irritability
- loss of interest in food, or, overeating
- escape through medication or alcohol
- loss of hope for the future

Particulars of the Death

Grief may have been set aside while dealing with police, a trial, an investigation. Coping with these factors will exhaust the bereaved. If the stepparent was the caregiver when the child died, issues of blame and guilt may be complicated and exacerbated.

There is a need for open communication between biological parents and stepparents, which, because of past circumstances, may be difficult.

Possible Isolation of a Stepparent

A stepparent may be excluded from all decisions regarding memorial arrangements and may not be acknowledged in sympathy cards. This exclusion compounds the grief the stepparent is feeling.

Old feelings between the biological parents may emerge after a child's death. They may need each other to recall good times with their child and to keep their memories alive. Again, a stepparent may feel excluded.

Grief Information Leaflets

The Compassionate Friends of Canada publishes several leaflets on different aspects of grief following the death of a child. They are available for download at no charge from our website www.TCFCanada.net.

- *How to Help When a Child Dies*
- *Sudden Death of a Child*
- *Mourning the Death of a Child*
- *Grief after a Substance-related Death*
- *My Child Died by Suicide*
- *My Child was Murdered*
- *Grieving the Loss of an Adult Child*
- *Grief in the Classroom*
- *When a Grandchild Dies*
- *Grief after a Long-term Illness*
- *Miscarriage, Stillbirth & Neonatal Death*
- *A Child with Special Needs has Died*
- *Sibling Grief when a Brother or Sister Dies*
- *Seven Principles for Bereaved Parents*
- *Seven Principles for Bereaved Siblings*

Strain on a Marriage

The death of a child, whatever the relationship of the parents, puts a strain on a marriage. Partners, even a pair of biological parents, will have had different relationships with the child who died. Communication may become difficult. Each parent involved will need to be a good listener to understand the feelings of the other. Perhaps the stepparent will have to express their hurt feelings of exclusion and say how much pain they are also feeling over the loss.

Looking for Support

Stepparents should know that they are welcome to attend Compassionate Friends meetings, with or without the biological parent. There, they will find an opportunity to express their feelings to sympathetic listeners. Attending these meetings together as spouses may even help their mutual understanding.

Those who are not ready or not able to meet in person are welcome to register for our closed Facebook group though the link on our website.



The Gift of Life

I didn't give you the gift of life,
But in my heart, I know.
The love I feel is deep and real,
As if it had been so.

For us to have each other
Is like a dream come true!
No, I didn't give you the gift of life,
Life gave me the gift of you.

Author unknown

For support in your area contact:

THE COMPASSIONATE FRIENDS OF CANADA



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Grieving the Death of a Stepchild



THE COMPASSIONATE FRIENDS OF CANADA

An international peer-support
organization for bereaved parents
and their surviving children