

HOW TO SUPPORT SOMEONE WHO IS GRIEVING THE LOSS OF THEIR CHILD

A family member, friend, or colleague has lost a child and you don't know what to say or do to help them. It is a hard time for everyone and you find yourself scared of saying or doing the wrong thing. Here are some tips for what you can say and do to support a grieving parent or child.

THINGS TO SAY AND DO

DO allow them to talk and express their loss as much as they are able.

DO offer to be a friend and allow them to talk about their loss as much and as often as they want to — 'Call me at any time if you need to talk.'

DO tell the family how sorry you are about the child's death and about the pain they must be feeling — 'I am so sorry for your loss.'

DO be available to listen, to run errands, to help with the other children, or whatever else seems needed at the time.

DO encourage them to be patient with themselves and not to expect too much of themselves.

DO give special attention to the child's brothers and sisters, grandparents and family at the funeral and in the months to come (they are often in need of attention which their parents may not be able to give).

DO let your genuine concern and caring show. Tell them how much you care — 'I can't begin to imagine how you feel.'

DO recognise that grieving has no time limit and varies from individual to individual. Continue to support them beyond the acute period.

DO talk about your memories of the deceased child and the special qualities that made the child endearing and remember to say the child's name.

DO acknowledge the death through visits, phone calls, sympathy cards, donations, and flowers.

DO remember important days such as birthdays, the death anniversary, Mother's Day, Father's Day, and any other significant day, which may be difficult for the bereaved.

DO create opportunities for partners to have time together and time out.

DO keep calling, always leave a message and ring back. Appreciate that your bereaved relative or friend doesn't always return phone calls right away.

DO expect your relationship with the bereaved to change and grow.

DO share your own good news with the bereaved parent. They still want to hear it.

THINGS YOU SHOULD NOT SAY OR DO

DON'T avoid mentioning their loss or the child's name out of fear of reminding them of their pain (they haven't forgotten it).

DON'T change the subject when they mention their dead child.

DON'T tell them what they should feel or do or **DON'T** avoid them because you are uncomfortable (being avoided by friends adds pain to an already painful experience.)

DON'T let your friends, family or co-workers grieve alone. There is a tremendous sense of isolation and abandonment during the grief process. You can help by caring, by being there, and by being the best friend you can.

DON'T make any comments which in any way suggest that their loss was their fault.

DON'T point out that at least they have their other children (children are not interchangeable; they cannot replace each other).

DON'T say 'you should be coping or feeling better by now' or anything else which may seem judgmental about their progress in grieving.

DON'T say that you know how they feel (unless you've experienced their loss yourself you probably don't know how they feel).

DON'T tell them not to cry. It hurts us to see them cry and makes us sad. But, by telling them not to cry, we are trying to take their grief away.

DON'T try to find something positive (e.g. a moral lesson, closer family ties, etc.) about the loss.

DON'T allow your own fears from preventing you from offering support to the bereaved.

DON'T think that good news (family wedding, pregnancy, job promotion, etc.) cancels out grief.

DON'T have expectations for what bereaved parents should or should not be doing at different times in their grief.

DON'T expect grieving parents to be strong and don't compliment them if they seem to be strong.

DON'T assume that when a grieving parent is laughing, they are over anything or grieving any less.

DON'T wait until you know the perfect thing to say. Just say whatever is in your heart or say nothing at all. Sometimes just being there is comfort enough.

DON'T find yourself saying any of the following:

- It was God's will — It was meant to be.
- He's in a better place now.
- Time heals all wounds.
- I know just how you feel.
- You are still young enough to have more children. Are you not over it yet? At least you have other children.
- It was for the best. — Now you will have an angel in heaven. — It could have been worse...
- It's been _____ (amount of time) and you have to get on with your life.
- Everything happens for a reason.

Adapted from *BabySteps Children's Fund*, www.babysteps.com