

What Can I Say To Grieving Parents?

By Cory and Heather Wessman

What do you say to a parent when the unspeakable happens? At a time such as this, words seem so insufficient to address this earth-shattering event. But parents who have experienced grief will tell you how appreciative they are when friends and family don't forget them in their grief and attempt to encourage them by continued and ongoing communication. Whatever you do, do not stop communicating with the parents. Grieving parents are in need of your support and encouragement, whether through telephone calls, emails, or notes and letters.

So what should you say? In reaching out to the grieving parents, consider the following guidance:

Be Genuine

First, be genuine in your communication. If you don't know what to say about the child's death, then emphasize your love, respect or admiration for the grieving parents. If you know that the grieving parents have a relationship with God, then even if you do not have a close relationship with the parents, consider referencing the nature of their hope in God. You might say something like, "I know that your faith is providing you hope and encouragement during these difficult days." Or "I know that it is your faith in God that is getting you through." Of course, this only makes sense if you know that they are relying on their faith.

Whatever you say, however, be genuine with the parents. Even among Christians, we can use religious-sounding language to avoid entering into the parent's grief with them. Do not use religious language to avoid emotional engagement. In order to effectively encourage grieving parents, we must demonstrate genuine care. Otherwise, the parents will sense the superficial nature of our interaction with them, and any words we use, even scriptural references, will seem flippant to the parents.

If you can't think of anything to say, most grieving parents would appreciate your honesty and empathy if you were to apologize for failing to find any words to say. You could simply say something like:

*"I am at a loss for words" or
"I'm so sorry, I don't know what to say."*

Most grieving parents would agree that the mere act of reaching out to them, even if you do not have the right words to say, is better than saying nothing at all. We recently wrote

to a fellow grieving parent,

“I don’t have any words to use right now to express how sorry I am for the loss of your child. You are experiencing a level of pain and loss that most people can’t imagine and will never experience. I don’t know what to say other than I am so sorry. But please know that I am praying that God would bring you and your family comfort.”

Don’t Minimize the Death

Second, do not say anything that would attempt to minimize their pain. In his book, *Lament for a Son*, philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff writes about the responses he received when his own son died in a mountain climbing accident. He writes, “Don’t say it’s not really so bad. Because it is. Death is awful, demonic. If you think your task as comforter is to tell me that really, all things considered, it’s not so bad, you do not sit with me in my grief but place yourself off in the distance away from me. Over there, you are of no help. What I need to hear from you is that you recognize how painful it is. I need to hear from you that you are with me in my desperation. To comfort me, you have to come close. Come sit beside me on my mourning bench.” Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 34.

Most people will not intentionally hurt the parents by explicitly telling the parents that their child’s death is not really that big of deal. Instead, parents are more often hurt when friends and family say something to imply that the death is not as earth shaking as the parents believe it to be. One way some people attempt to minimize the pain is through references to the grieving parent’s other children, either living or yet unborn. We encourage you not to say things like, “Oh, don’t worry, you will have more children,” or “It’s good you have other living children,” or “Now you can focus all of your attention on your other children.” While it is true that we ought to be grateful for all of our children, it is not possible to fill the void left by the death of one child with the love we have for other children. Any parent knows that the total amount of love they have for their children is multiplied, not divided, across all of their children. Therefore, we should not seek to minimize the parent’s pain by trying to divert their attention in this manner, as it will only aggravate the pain.

Don’t Compare Grief or Talk About Others in Grief

Third, do not succumb to the temptation of avoiding a deeper, more personal conversation and relationship with the parents by comparing grief or by talking about others who are grieving. Grieving parents are not helped by being informed about those you know who have also experienced grief of some kind. This is generic information that provides no solace to the parents whatsoever. Parents will hear things like, “Oh, I know about your grief. My neighbor’s sister’s son died a few years ago.” Or, “One of my coworkers just lost a daughter at 28 weeks.” It is true that death has existed

in all times and occurs to everyone, even small children. But if you focus on how others suffered, you are implying to the parents that since everyone suffers, the death of their own child is not unusual or worthy of this level of grief.

Some friends and family talk about others in grief only because they don't know what else to say and don't want to create an awkward silence. Rather than feeling like you need to talk to the grieving parents, you can be extremely helpful by listening to the parents. In order to be most helpful to the grieving parents, you won't know what emotions they are facing, and what practical problems they have, unless you ask. Instead of feeling like you need to talk, ask questions about how the parents are grieving. How are they (the parents) getting through? What are the best memories they have of their deceased child? How can you (the friends) help them? Are they getting enough to eat at home? Have they returned to work? What challenges have they faced at work or at home? It is certainly more emotionally difficult for you to ask probing questions and listen to the parents rather than you purposefully avoiding emotional engagement. But if you really want to support the grieving parents, you ought to enter into the grief with them in this way.

Share Biblical Encouragement

Finally, pray that God would give you wisdom as to how to encourage the grieving parents. In the eighth chapter of Romans, Paul emphasizes that even in the midst of the great trials in our lives, when the sufferings are beyond anything we can handle or even be able to describe in words, the Holy Spirit intercedes on our behalf to God. Romans 8:26 says, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words." Even though our words are insufficient to address grief, God is enough. When we pray for the grieving parents, the Spirit is able to go to the Father on our behalf for the needs of the parents. The very same God who knows what the parents need can, through the Holy Spirit, help us pray for them.

If a particular passage of scripture seems encouraging to you, and you think the parents would benefit from it, share it with the parents. You might consider sending them an email or letter along with the scripture passage. You need not write a book to them; your note could be as simple as, "I was praying for you today, and this particular passage came to mind." Or, you could say, "I hope you might find this scripture passage encouraging," or just "We continue to pray for you." Even in the unlikely scenario that the parents will not care for **what** you say, they will most assuredly be appreciative of how you **have taken** action to reach out to them in their grief.