



FAMILY BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT SERVICES

Social Work Department
Royal Children's Hospital

NEWSLETTER NOVEMBER 2009

Welcome to the Royal Children's Hospital's Family Bereavement Support Services' November Newsletter. This month's newsletter includes a summary of notes taken during the November Group evening, without participant names, as well as quotes from hand-outs used from the evening's topic, "The Importance of Rituals". This month's "Straight from the Heart" was written by Petrina Barson, mother of Maya Rose, called *'The Facts of Life.'*

The Importance of Rituals & Remembering

Our November evening bereavement support group was lead by Geraldine Paine, a generalist counselor who has specialised in grief and loss with North Yarra Community Health Service. Geraldine led a very interesting discussion on the importance of rituals and remembering our children. The key aim of the evening's discussion was to *"normalize our human-ness in both our desire and need to remember."*

Geraldine began the evening by speaking about how *"rituals are part of ways in helping us to connect to what is important to us as well as ways to acknowledge what is important to us."* She began the group by asking parents to share a special memory of their child that they will always remember.

In response to her request, the parents spoke about many special moments that included their child's **smiles, frowns, kicks in utero, bath time, happy natures, and a time when RCH nurses "got mooned" by one of the children.**

Geraldine spoke of the most common reminders of special moments being family photos. Many parents agreed that their child's photos and personal videos had become very special reminders of time with their children. They talked about wishing they had taken more, but how *"at the time you are so taken up with what's happening, it's hard to remember to take photos."*

Another parent said *"I didn't want reminders of certain times and instead choose to remember the funny times and special times that you couldn't catch in a photo."* Another parent agreed stating *"Humour is very healing, but the last month of photos is still very painful. I don't want to look at them, but they are still very important. It's important to tell the story and to remember."*

Memories & Triggers

Geraldine explained to the group how when a child dies, we experience an intensity of the present that includes what we come to know as the 'now' as well as fears of the unknown: the future—a life without our child. She drew a diagram of a figure '8' with the top loop representing the future and bottom circle representing the past; with the 'x' connecting the two loops representing the present. She discussed how with each step into the future, memories are triggered of the past. *"It is a daily experience, reminding us of happy and sad times. Memories can be painful and triggers often cause pain, but these are also opportunities to remember your child. Like memories and triggers, rituals are important for remembering. They are ways to keep our children alive in our minds and hearts."*

From her experience with helping bereaved families, Geraldine stated that *"many parents are often fearful of what might happen next. There is a fear of the*

unknown—of the future without their child, a life they haven't experienced yet."

Geraldine spoke of the importance of finding friends, *"people that you can share the memories with. People who can hear your stories, laugh and cry with you. A unique friend remembers your child's birthday. It's such a special acknowledgement."* Parents in the group agreed, but stated they had had mixed experiences in receiving support from family and friends. One spoke of returning to work and speaking of his daughter, *"I can clear the room just by mentioning her name. They just don't know how to deal with it."*

Remembering through Rituals

Geraldine talked of the importance of hanging onto memories and asked the group to share ways, rituals they do, to keep their child's memory alive. Parents shared the following:

- *Every morning I say "good morning" and at the end of the day say "goodnight".*
- *"I have a locket with his hair in it. It's like my lucky charm and sometimes I talk to it."*
- *"I light a candle for her every night and blow it out when it's bed time and say good night."*
- *"I talk to her everyday, just remembering different things."*

- “We have a special spot in the garden, special plants and a plaque with his name on it.”
- “I have a locket as well with his photo in it. Sometimes it’s open and people around say hello to him. He’s still here and they know it.”
- “We have gatherings on his birthday and have a BBQ with his friends. They all come. It’s great.”
- “I go to the school functions and have been asked to dance with his friends. It’s been great. They all remember.”
- “I have his friends over for dinner and watch a video that his friends made with him.”
- “I look through photos and sometimes see toys in toy shops that I know he would have liked.”
- “We have a table with his things on it. It’s his special table where we remember him.”
- “I go places where I’ve been with him and remember what we would do.”
- “I look at his photo first thing in the morning and last thing at night before going to bed.”
- “We include his name in every birthday card.”
- “We have a special stone.”
- “We go to the grave every Saturday at 10:30, to clean the grave and bring fresh flowers.”
- “I visit the cemetery. Not as much as I used to, but I don’t feel guilty. I still remember. I will never forget. I know he’s not forgotten, but we do other things now.”
- “I give her two kisses in the morning, one from me and one from our son.”
- “We have a big birthday party each year.”
- “I keep her photo and some of her ashes in my locket.”
- “We have her initials and date of birth as our number plate.”
- “She was given a special green dress



and now green is her colour and we have lots of green through-out the house.”

• Another family shared that their child

had a special purple ball, “now everything is about the colour purple.”

More parents shared similar stories about special colours or symbols, like Winnie the Pooh, becoming extra special reminders of the child. Several parents had had tattoos commemorating their child and stated other family members had gotten them in memory of their child too.

Geraldine shared some other ideas that parents had found useful, such as

- Lighting candles,
- Buying a gift in the child’s name and giving it to another child or
- Giving one/some of their child’s toys to another child who needed it so it could continue to be enjoyed and loved by a child.

Memories– a healthy part of life

She reminded the group that grieving is not a linear process. She stated “the early days in a bereavement can last up to 5 years. Originally Freud thought people should just be able to forget and move on until he lost his own child. Then he acknowledged that you can’t just forget.”

“Memories are important and a healthy part of life. It is essential that parents allow themselves to feel and cycle in and out of the past, present and future thoughts.”

One parent commented, “Participating in the Memorial Service has been really important for us. I couldn’t go this year because my son didn’t want to go. He didn’t want to be sad, but for me the Memorial Service had been a great place for us to remember.”

In response, Geraldine discussed a variety of ways to help children understand that sadness is ok. She talked about different books being very useful for parents to read to children, to talk with them, using kids’ language to explain things, as well as allowing children to participate in their sibling’s funeral.

Some parents commented about their experiences in helping their other children “keeping it real with them helped us.” Another responded “Whatever helps

them understand it a bit better helps everyone.”

Do It Your Own Way

Geraldine emphasised with the group that grieving and rituals are an individual and unique process. She said “Do your own rituals and do it in your own way. It’s for you to decide what you do and how you do it.”

She highlighted that certain days like Christmas, Mother’s Day and Father’s Day in particular “are just days that will happen and come and go with often the anticipation being worse than the actual day.”

Parents shared different ways they manage special occasions. They recalled having a gift under the tree for their child and making a Christmas decoration with their child’s photo. Others said, “I try to avoid it and do something else.” “I think of Christmas at the very last minute and then I deal with it.” With Mother’s Day and Father’s Day, “My son buys something from he and his brother.” Another reported “Every year it is a Winnie the Pooh card. The first year I couldn’t read it, but now it’s ok.”

The group was encouraged to “do what’s important to you, what helps you. You need to do whatever sits comfortably with you that is a way that is special. Remember to be gentle and kind to yourselves in your grief.”

Some Helpful Books

Below is a list of books that parents and others who have experienced the death of a child might find useful. Many can be found in your local library and often school libraries as well.

That Help with Death of a Child:

- Dear Parents by Joy Johnson
- Empty Arms by Sherokee Iise
- Children Die Too by Joy & Marv Johnson
- A Broken Heart Still Beats by Anne McCracken & Mary Semel
- Strong & Tender (acknowledging fathers’ grief) by Pat Scwiebert
- Little Footprints by Dorothy Ferguson

That Help with Death of a Sibling:

- A Birthday Present for Daniel by Juliet Rothman
- We Were Gonna Have A Baby, But we Had an Angel Instead by Pat Schwiebert
- Stacey Had a Little Sister by Judith Friedman
- The Empty Place by Roberta Temes

Other Titles Found to be Useful:

- When Dinosaurs Die by L. Krammsny-Brown & M. Brown
- Badger's Parting Gifts by Susan Varley
- How to Explain Death to a Child (a guide for adults)
- The Grief Book (strategies for young people) teens
- Coping With Grief (adults)
- Beginnings & Endings (kids picture book)
- Whats Dead Mean (kids work book)
- My Many Coloured Days (Dr Seuss-picture book)
- Coping With Grief & Loss by Mal McKissock

Conclusion

To finish the group, Geraldine read out a poem published in Compassionate Friends Newsletter:

And when we have
remembered everything,

We grow afraid
of what we may forget.

A face, a voice, a smile?

A birthday? Anniversary?

No need to fear forgetting,

Because

THE HEART REMEMBERS ALWAYS

Reference: www.compassionatefriends.ca/images/dec_jan03_04.tn

Our Thanks

On behalf of the parents attending the Family Bereavement Support Group, I'd like to thank Geraldine Paine for a great evening's discussion.



Straight from the Heart 

'The Facts of Life' is a poem written by Petrina Barson, mother of Maya Rose. Petrina has published a book of poems called 'Now We Are Four'.

This poem is dedicated to:
Maya Rose Thompson
27/02/03 - 15/08/06

The Facts of Life

1

In the early days
I felt I wore you
like some logo
on my face.

Amazed only when the woman at the
eggs could not read your absence
from the creases and
undulations there.

My traitor face -
bland as an egg carton -
did not scream at her.

I wanted to tell her -
standing there reading labels -
of all the things
I was discovering
that I had lost -
each moment cracking open
to find you gone:

Only four places at the table;
only three pink sugared biscuits
left in the fridge (you helped to roll
them before boredom eased you back to
Lara jumping on the sofa);
only two children in the rear vision
mirror;

only one direction
that this blessed life drags us -
Heels banging on the road.

3 -Petrina Barson

Support Services

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local community health centre
- A trained counselor
- Lifeline 13 11 14
- Nurse-on-Call Tel. 1300 606 024 – for expert health information and advice 24 hours, 7 days
- Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement – Bereavement Counselling and Support Service Tel. (03) 9265 2111
- Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement – Kids Grieve Too; Younger Bereaved Partners Tel. (03) 9543 9449
- Mercy Grief Services Tel. (03) 9364 9838 – for people living in the western region of Melbourne
- Kids Help Line Tel. 1800 551 800 24 hrs a day seven days/ week.
- The Compassionate Friends Victoria Tel. (03) 9888 4944 or 1800 641 091 – 24 hrs a day, seven days/wk.
- SIDS and Kids Victoria Tel. (03) 9822 9611 or 1800 240 400 – 24 hours a day, seven days a week.
- Very Special Kids—Australia's first hospice for children 9804 622
- SANDS (Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Support) Tel. (03) 9899 0218
- IDSA (Industrial Death Support & Advocacy) Tel. (03) 9309 4453
- Victims of Crime Helpline Tel. 1800 819 817
- Road Trauma Support Team Tel. (03) 9819 9922 or 1300 367 797



Day time Bereaved Parents Support Group

December 3rd 10am—12pm

In the Mackinnon Collaborative Practice Centre—Room 4, 7th floor, RCH South East Building



Parents' Bereavement Support Group Meetings 2010

Recently Bereaved Parents' Information & Support Evening

Thursday 4th February

Thursday 6th May

Thursday 5th August

Thursday 4th November

Monthly Parents' Bereavement Support Group

February 18th

March 18th

April 15th

May 20th

June 17th

July 15th

August 19th

September 16th

October 21st

November 18th

December 16th

Venue: Seminar Room 2
4th Floor, Front Entry Building
Royal Children's Hospital
Flemington Road
Parkville 3052

Time: 7:30 - 9:30pm

Day Time Parents' Bereavement Support Group

Thursday March 4th

Thursday June 3rd

Thursday September 2nd

Thursday December 2nd

Venue: Mackinnon Collaborative Practice Centre
Room 4, 7th Floor,
South East Building, RCH

Time: 10:00am - 12:00pm



Our letter box is waiting!

Contributions such as responses and reflections on the groups' themes, poems, letters, songs, quotations from parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters and friends are most welcome in the Newsletters. Share your thoughts, experiences and questions with others who are bereaved.

Please forward them to:

The Editor
Family Bereavement Support Programme
Social Work Department
Royal Children's Hospital
Flemington Road
PARKVILLE VIC 3052

Phone: 03 9345 6111
Or email: karen.ditty@rch.org.au

The next meeting of the Family Bereavement Support Evening Group will be held on:

Thursday 10th December
7:30 pm – 9:30 pm
Seminar Room 2, 4th Floor
Front Entry Building
Royal Children's Hospital

Please note the December Group this year is held a week earlier

In the **December Group** we will have a guest speaker from Very Special Kids speaking about "Self Care & the Importance of Remembering Ourselves When Remembering in the Festive Season".

It will be an interactive creative evening.

This will be our last group for 2009

Please join us.

The newsletter is always a team effort. Thank you to our guest speaker Geraldine Paine, grief counsellor with North Yarra Community Health Service, to Carol Quayle for co-facilitating the Group, and to our skilled committed Admin Team- Carly Blanche, Rebecca Welsh and Sam Harris.

Karen Ditty
Editor