Returning to Work Following Bereavement: When is the right time?

INTRODUCTIONS:
As usual we began the group by inviting those present to introduce themselves and their child. Parents within the group had diverse stories about the life and death of their child and were all in different places in their personal journey of living with grief. One mother said “the reason I came to the group is to listen to how you all are going and ways of moving forward”.

The theme of the group was around experiences of returning to work following your child’s death. Some members of the group were back at work and had returned at various times after their child’s death, while others had chosen not to return to work. Parents expressed a variety of attitudes towards their readiness for return to work and discussed the reasons behind their decision to return or non-return to work.

Throughout the evening, we had the opportunity to discuss common and diverse experiences in returning to work, what parents found challenging and what they found helpful. There were also a variety of issues explored during the group relating to shared experiences of losing a child, feelings of grief and hope. The following are some of the issues discussed.

RETURNING TO WORK – A Parents Perspective
As mentioned above, there were a range of opinions discussed in relation to returning to work. A few parents had been on maternity leave when their baby died. As one parent said “I couldn’t stay on maternity leave and think about...”
the things I should have been doing”. Another parent also on maternity leave echoed this sentiment and said “I returned to work part time. I’m struggling but it is good to be busy”. This feeling that it was good to be busy resonated with another parent who spoke of returning to work very soon after her child had died – “I went back to work the following Monday (after the funeral). I find work therapeutic. Some people think it is avoidance”. For this parent she expressed that being at work has been helpful in her coping, in that work keeps her busy and occupied, though that this did not lessen her feelings of grief.

Some unfortunately did not have the option of not returning to work when they would have preferred to remain at home. This was difficult when the return to work had to occur before the parent felt ready for this. One parent told us that she had been working 3 days a week while her child was alive. When she returned to work she initially went back to full time but then felt she “couldn’t do it. I felt guilty about being able to work full time because I didn’t have my child. I cut back to 3 days again”.

There was also discussion about how involved you get in the workplace after you return. This comment made sense to most of those in the group: “I went to work 2-3 days a week but I couldn’t go to Christmas parties and family events”.

A parent who felt that his workplace was on the whole quite supportive, found that it was “important to set up the ground rules before you return to work, as it helped me prepare and clarify what was expected of me”. Another parent said she had discussed expectations with her boss before returning to work and even now, a couple of years later “I can call work and say I am having a bad day and am not coming in” and this is understood and accepted.

EXPERIENCES WITH COLLEAGUES:
Returning to work brings with it the need to face work colleagues and their various responses to your loss. As one father said, returning to work was made easier by having supportive management but he found it “hard to respect my work colleagues”. He said he lost respect for them when they were unable to acknowledge the birth and death of his child. One parent told us that a colleague had said “it’s good to see you back. I wanted to say, ‘no, it isn’t, I should be home with my baby’.” Others did at least attempt to acknowledge the loss - “Some people approached me to say they didn’t know what to say, with tears in their eyes. I wanted my daughter’s death to effect others”. Some present in the group felt others did not know how to acknowledge such a significant loss so chose to say nothing at all. As one parent said “death is one of the last taboos that people get freaked out talking about. I think people are so afraid to say the wrong thing they don’t say anything at all”.


It seems that sometimes people need help to be able to talk. A parent shared with us her experience of establishing a ‘Run For the Kids’ team in her daughter’s name and suddenly finding that she could talk about her daughter at work in a way that had not been possible before. Unfortunately this was not a universal experience as another father had been “very disappointed by my colleagues lack of response and sponsorship of the Run for the Kids team” he had set up.

Parents had different experiences of which colleagues were able to approach and speak to them about their child. One parent found “older colleagues were more likely to talk” while another found that the “younger people were more open”. One parent whose baby had died said “anyone who was pregnant didn’t come near me”. This was an experience shared by others whose child had died as a young baby.

Disappointments as well as positives in the responses of others were not limited to the work place. One mother who was not working said she found the school her daughter had attended were supportive of her continued involvement there as a volunteer. She said “It helps that the principal and another staff member have both had the experience of losing a child”. Insensitive and unhelpful comments by others were a source of great pain and anger to many parents present. “I don’t like it when people say ‘I know what you’re going through’. How can they”? In the group parents were able to give many examples of similar comments made by family, friends, work colleagues and many others – unfortunately a common experience for grieving parents.

**HOW WORK WAS DIFFERENT?**

Some parents talked about how they have been changed by their grief in many ways. “I find retention of information more difficult at my job. I’m still good at my job, but it takes me double the energy”. “I am less tolerant, don’t waste my time”. Parents also expressed a lessened ability to concentrate and about feeling frustrated with ‘trivial’ conversations and meetings that go on endlessly without resolving anything. One parent said she “has heard that other people think I am less tolerant”. She is not really aware of this herself but believes others think this.

**NOT RETURNING TO WORK:**

There were parents in the group who had not returned to work. For a variety of reasons, some parents had not been in paid employment before their child died, while others had chosen to remain on leave. One parent said she needed time for herself after feelings of exhaustion following all of the activity surrounding her child’s death. She said it is like having “a blank canvas. I need to surround myself with beautiful things. Work can wait”.

**In Summary:**

It was clear that work plays different roles in the lives of
different people. For some it provides welcome distraction and activity in a time of otherwise overwhelming grief, while for others having time at home without the need to be tied to a work routine and performance expectations has been what they have needed. What parents expressed was particularly difficult is when parents are not in a position to choose when and if they return to work.

Parents also found the belief and expectation by others that when you return to work you have somehow ‘moved on’ was a challenging and shared experience.

“Other people thought that because I had returned to work I was ‘moving on’ and was ‘getting over’ my grief”. The feeling of the group was that while returning to work may help you to move forward this is not the same as ‘moving on’ from your grief.

**COMMON EXPERIENCES DISCUSSED:**

**AFTER THE FUNERAL:**

Discussion about the responses of others led on to conversations about how things change after the funeral and the expectations others have of you. One parent said “I am not a touchy feely person, I had so many hugs at the funeral, I wanted people to get away from me but I know they mean well”. Expectations of others as to how you ‘should’ behave can cause much stress and distress.

A very common experience expressed was the feeling of isolation and significant “drop off” of support from family and friends following the funeral. One Parent said “initially everyone is there, and everybody wants to cook meals, do your ironing – but it stops and you feel forgotten”. This experience of many friends not being able to go the distance was almost universal. A parent who had recently attended the funeral of a child they knew commented that these parents were also being overwhelmed with kindness and she advised them to “enjoy it while you have it because it won’t last”. One parent described this disappearance of people from your life as being ‘dumped’ “It’s funny how so-called friends dump you after your child dies. Why? It makes me angry”. This feeling of being forgotten, being left in a shattered world while life goes on for everyone else was common. One parent said “My family encouraged me to move on”. And that they didn’t understand that “It gets worse before it gets better, day after day without your child”.

**MARKING SIGNIFICANT OCCASIONS:**

A number of parents talked about how they mark significant occasions such as birthdays and anniversaries as well as times such as Christmas. Again the responses of others were often a source of grief and anger in themselves although this response was not universal. One parent told us of her experience of celebrating her daughter’s birthday with her school friends. “I had her birthday at the school with her friends singing happy birthday. I made cakes and did all the things I
would have done if she had been there. It was beautiful though incredibly sad”. This mother told us she found celebrating her own birthday much more difficult than celebrating her daughter’s birthday.

Another parent told us that “people are wary of my son’s birthday. They think the anniversary (of his death) is the same thing, but it’s not. His birthday is one of the best days of our lives”. For these parents the birthday is a day to celebrate and to be happy but others find this difficult and do not want to participate. “I want to celebrate it (birthday), other people don’t want to come because it’s out of their comfort zone, but it’s out of my comfort zone to go to a birthday where I know my child is missing”.

Different times and occasions have different significance. “I find school holidays incredibly hard. I should be picking my girl up from school and then other parents complain about being home with their kids during holidays”.

There were a number of parents in the group for whom their child’s death was very recent and they had not yet celebrated a birthday. Anticipating these days – birthdays, anniversaries etc can be more stressful than the day itself and others advised that it usually helps if you have a plan.

**CHANGES AND CHALLENGES:**
A Parent talked about how she cannot concentrate enough to watch a complete movie and another said she could not read a book unless it was a book about grief or loss and then she could read the whole thing. This was a common experience expressed various parents in the group.

There were a number of parents in the group who had been providing a high level of supportive care for their child, in some cases, for many years. For these parents, much of their identity and purpose surrounded their carer role, which following the death of their child no longer existed. “I got used to being a carer, now I’m not sure what to do”. Parents spoke of not knowing how to fill their days now “suddenly there is nothing”. There are also a variety of people who are involved in your life through your child, particularly if the child has some special needs or medical condition. These people leave your life when your child dies and for many parents in this situation this is also a loss – “I found out how much you miss the staff”.

One parent has continued her involvement in her child’s school. “After the death I went to the school regularly to help out. I want to see her friends and hear them talk about her”. This enables her to maintain a connection with her child. Other parents also had ongoing relationships with their child’s friends which they found brought them comfort and the opportunity to
Many parents talked about not being able to pack their child’s things away. One parent says “I have left my child’s bedroom exactly as it was and I lock the door when other children are around”. Another parent said “I cannot change anything yet but feel there will be a time when I can”. Everyone agreed it was important to do what felt right for you and that this would be different for different people. Some parents spoke of the need to try to understand why their child’s death had happened and different things they found helpful in dealing with this ongoing question. One parent said “going to church helped. I try to understand about death and what it is like”. A number of parents turned to books to try to help them make sense of life and death but it was generally agreed that there is nothing fair about children dying and that it “seems to defy the order of the universe”. Parents talked about how hard it is to keep going. “My other children keep me here. Without them I wouldn’t be here”, and “the worst thing is the emptiness and I can’t hack it”. One parent said “I think it is OK to have these feelings about not wanting to be here”. The group is a place where these feelings can be acknowledged and discussed without judgment.

FINISHING UP:
As the group drew to a close a parent who was attending the group for the first time said she had found it extremely helpful to hear the experiences of everyone else but felt she was “a bit of a fraud” as she had not had the experience of living with her child for many years and then losing them. Another parent spoke for the whole group when she said “everyone’s journey is so personal”. Someone likened this experience to taking off a band-aid – “whether you pull it off slowly or rip it off the pain is still the same”. Through the group discussion it became very clear that each parent must find their own path after the death of their child. While other people often disappoint there are also those who seem to know the right thing to say and who do not judge or tell you what you should be feeling.

With regard to work, it was felt work can be very helpful in providing some routine and structure and can be a welcome distraction and focus for some, while for others having the ‘luxury’ of not having to join the workforce was greatly appreciated. When anticipating a return to work it is helpful to have expectations clarified before you return. Guidelines about ‘How to be a Compassionate Employer’ are available at www.grief.org.au/resources/employer/pdf and this may be a useful resource to give your employer before you return to work.

Parents continued their discussions over supper before heading home. We hoped the group was useful for those who came and for all of you who share the experience and wisdom of the group through the newsletter.
We received a beautiful email from the McCarroll family which they gave us permission to include in this newsletter. This newsletter could not be produced without the generosity of those who attend the group and allow their words and wisdom to be quoted and sent out to hundreds of bereaved parents each month. Below are extracts from the email.

Well it is the start of April 2013 and we write to you in a totally different head space to when we left the RCH at 7pm on the 28th July 2010. We had just lost our second child Cormac McCarroll who was 6 days old and at the time we had no concrete reasons as to why this had happened. It was not until 6 weeks after we lost him that we understood that he was taken by a genetic disorder "Gauches disease". When we thought the news could not be any worse we were told it would be a 1 in 4 chance that any other children would have the same disorder and it definitely would be fatal.

My husband & I made that long drive home with our 18 month old Daughter and many family members that had driven to be with us. When we made the 2 hr journey home to Shepparton the grief was indescribable.

The realisation that at 7 am the next morning our 18 month old daughter had no comprehension as to the gravity of the preceding day and just wanted breakfast was devastating. We were unsure how we were going to go on.

The staff @ RCH on the day we lost Cormac were incredible and I can not speak highly enough of them. The memory box, casts of Cormacs feet & hands and the photos that were taken of him are dearly treasured and are tangible items to remember our beautiful boy. Money can not buy that comfort.

Since returning home my husband and I have been receiving the monthly newsletters. We have been unable to attend the meetings due to distance and the newsletters were a real resource for us. Sometimes it was as small as someone saying the exact words that were in our heart at the time and the comfort that comes with knowing that you are not the only one is revitalising. Also the tips that were often in there by the key note speakers about understanding how to move on without forgetting or diminishing your loved ones memory were invaluable. Even some techniques to manage the enormous grief were helpful.

After the birth of our third child who was a healthy bouncing boy and who turns one tomorrow, I feel like as a family we have turned a corner.

Thank you again for supporting our family at a time when we desperately needed it. I wish all the other recipients of your newsletter a smooth as possible journey in their grief.

Erin & Ben McCarroll, Shepparton.
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:

Family Bereavement Support Programme
Social Work Department
Royal Children’s Hospital
50 Flemington Road
PARKVILLE VIC 3052

Phone: 03 9345 6111
Or email: bereavement.services@rch.org.au

Our letter box is Waiting!

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

Thursday 18th April
7:30 pm – 9:00 pm
Ella Latham Meeting Room 2
Ground Floor, West Building
(Main Street)

For the April group we will be joined by Shirley Nash, Pastoral Care RCH who will discuss the topic: The Red Tree— a story of grief and hope.

‘The Red Tree’ is a children’s book by award winning Australian author Shaun Tan. ‘The Red Tree’ offers space for grief to be explored and for hope to emerge more strongly. During our time together we will use this story to focus our thoughts and feelings relating to the spiritual journey that bereavement encompasses.

Please join us in April

The newsletter is always a team effort. Thank you to Helen Stewart for guiding the group discussion & to Laurissa Serratore for her assistance and scribing parents’ statements.
Also to the administration team, Carly Blanche for ensuring the Newsletter is formatted and distributed to interested people.

Social Work Department, RCH