



Helping a Friend Whose Child has Died

By Teske R. Drake, PhD, adapted

The death of a child does not flow with the natural order of how we perceive life and death. In our society, we expect people to live long and full lives. The reality, however, is that people of all ages can and do die, including children. As a support person to a family impacted by such a loss, you serve an important role. Here are some practical suggestions for how you can help:

- ♥ **Don't wait for your friend to ask *you* for help; take the initiative!** Be proactive in your support. Instead of saying, "If you need anything at all, please let me know" consider the difference when you state, "I would love to do _____ for you and your family during this difficult time." Don't wait for the grieving parents to come to you. Chances are, they won't ask. When you take the initiative, however, they will be so very thankful. Here are just a few specific ways that you can offer to help:
 - **Deliver a meal.** In the days and weeks that follow a loss, your friend will be experiencing a time of readjustment, both physically and emotionally. Offer to bring a meal to the family. This will be one less thing that they have to worry about during a difficult time.
 - **Offer to care for any living children.** If your friend has other children, offer to care for them at a time that would be convenient for the family. Perhaps its practical matters they need to attend to or just to give them some time away *together*.
 - **Offer to clean house.** When struck by grief, many everyday activities come to a standstill, including household chores. Be sure to ask first, but offer to help your friend by cleaning house. It will be one less thing for the family to have to worry about.
- ♥ **Speak the child's name.** Speaking the name is a way of honoring that child's life. It means the world to grieving parents to know that others genuinely care and remember their child.
- ♥ **Remember special days.** Facing special days, such as holidays, birthdays, anniversary dates and the like can be difficult for anyone who has had someone special in their life die. For parents who have had a child die, there are some additional dates to be aware of, including: Mother's and Father's Days. Send a card to show you care and be sure to acknowledge the significance that these special days hold.
- ♥ **Ask your friend how they are doing.** This may seem like a pretty straightforward suggestion. The truth is, however, we have a difficult time talking with people about death. Do not ignore the topic in the days, weeks, and months after your friend's loss. Rather, ask them how they are doing and be prepared to probe further with additional questions or conversation. Grieving parents need to know that others truly care about what they are going through.
- ♥ **Give a gift of remembrance or a keepsake.** When someone loved dies, we are left with many memories and a treasure box of artifacts, both of which serve as evidence of life. When a child dies, however, there may be fewer memories or tangible mementos. There are numerous gift ideas to give in remembrance or as a keepsake. Some specific examples may include:
 - Have a child quilt or blanket made and personalize it in some unique way
 - Customize a piece of jewelry with the child's name or initials or consider giving a special charm
 - Be creative and put together a picture book or shadow box to hold special items

- ♥ **Don't forget dad.** Each person is going to experience their grief in their own unique way. Dads are often expected to "be strong" and to protect the mom. Such expectation places added pressure for grieving dads. Recognize that the dad is grieving too and be sure to acknowledge this fact.
- ♥ **Do not unintentionally discount the death.** Both our actions and our words come into play with this suggestion. We tend to operate under the misconception that bringing up the death will only cause my friend greater pain. As a result, we tend to ignore the topic altogether. While our intentions are to protect our friend, we are unintentionally discounting the child's life and death. The same can be said in situations when we try to offer up the right words, which then come off as hurtful or minimizing. When in doubt, it may be better to say, "I don't know what to say, but I am here for you." This shows that you care without the risk of saying the wrong thing with the best of intentions.
- ♥ **Offer your friend helpful resources to show you care.** There are a number of books, support groups, online communities, and various other resources aimed at helping families who have experienced the death of a child. Do the research and let your friend know about the resources available to him/her in your community.
- ♥ **Finally, BE A FRIEND.** This may seem like an obvious statement. Truly, be a friend. Continue to do the things you enjoyed doing together before your friend's child died. Think also of new activities you can enjoy together that honor your friend's child, such as a fundraiser for some related and worthy cause. The possibilities for incorporating ways to memorialize the child together are endless. The act of doing so, and being the person who initiates it, will show your friend just how much you care.

A personal note of encouragement, as you help your friend...

Dear Friend,

I speak from experience when I say, your friendship matters. Don't let the awkwardness of the situation or your own discomfort keep you from reaching out to a friend whose child has died. Your friend wants to hear from you. Your friend wants to know that you are there and that you care. The suggestions given above are a collection of selfless acts that a few of my own select friends carried out when my babies died. Their support in my own time of grief was a tremendous comfort to me and I want nothing but the same for your grieving friend.

*Take Good Care,
Teske*