



**Just in
case...**

**Information for
grieving families
and the professionals
who support them**

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children®

**1-800-THE-LOST®
(1-800-843-5678)**

www.missingkids.com



Information for grieving families and the professionals who support them

The process of adjusting to a loss is known as grief. Grief itself is not a feeling, but the process of grieving includes every possible human emotion. When a child is missing or deceased, those feelings and emotions may be overwhelming, and the process of adjusting to life without a child may seem impossible. The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® (NCMEC) created this brochure to help families remember they are not alone and provide information about what to expect in the grieving process.

Everyone grieves differently, and everyone reacts to the pain of loss differently. Parents, guardians, siblings, other relatives, and close family friends will react to the absence of a child differently. Some will react emotionally. Some will cope by doing things and keeping active. Some will mentally analyze all aspects of the loss until they find some good in it, no matter how small. Some feel, some do, and some think. No one way of grieving is better than the others. Each way is just different. Each family member should understand the best support to receive and give to others is to recognize they are grieving too, but possibly in a different way. How we grieve should never be judged. Family members need to give themselves, their family members, and their close friends the time they need to grieve and feel the pain of that grief.

The Process of Grief

As families grieve for a child they may find feelings seem to be nearly overwhelming. One of the best ways to be sure those feelings don't become overwhelming is to talk about their child, their grief, and their feelings. Families need to find people who will listen such as friends, faith- or spiritual-based professionals, and mental-health professionals. Families need to share their memories along with family expectations, dreams, and hopes. Also there are some experiences individual family members should expect in the process of grieving. You may

- Continue to look for your family member. You may think you see your family member in a crowd or out of the corner of your eye. You may hear a cough, laugh, or sneeze that, just for an instant, lets you think it might be your family member. Each time you rediscover it isn't, it may hurt.
- Continue to do things for your family member out of habit such as looking for his or her laundry, setting a place at the table, planning activities he or she will enjoy, or calling out to remind him or her to go to bed. Again, each time you realize your family member is gone, it may hurt.
- Discover a need to redefine roles. Each family member may have a role defined by the things he or she does. The family member may have had specific chores and responsibilities. You now need to decide if you will fill these responsibilities, assign them to someone else, or leave them undone. Your family member may have had a specific schedule. You will need to adjust to a new schedule no longer including your family member.
- Find these roles are defined by how family members interact with one another. What role did your family member fill? Was he or she the smart, quiet, mischievous, generous, and/or thoughtful one, or did your family member fulfill some other role? You came to count on that role in your family and will now have to view your family without it.
- Find difficulty in eating and sleeping. It is important to maintain your routine as much as possible and continue to eat, even if it's a small amount, and go to bed at your regular time. If you aren't able to sleep, ask your doctor about things that may help, and keep in mind relaxation techniques may be beneficial in allowing you to rest, if not sleep.
- Find normal daily tasks too overwhelming to complete. It is helpful to break them down into small pieces that may be more easily accomplished. Instead of thinking of doing the laundry, think of taking the laundry to the laundry room,

then putting it in the washer, then moving it to the dryer, then unloading the dryer, then folding the laundry, and then putting the laundry away. The point is to break the task into small pieces that may be more easily accomplished. If you aren't completing the entire task, you will know you have accomplished some of it. Congratulate yourself for what you did accomplish.

Every member of the family will have these experiences to some degree. Talking with family members about their own experiences helps them understand they are not alone and what they are thinking and feeling is "normal."

Supporting All Family Members

Finding the emotional and physical energy to support other family members at this time may be difficult. Immediate family members, extended family members, and close family friends may all try to be supportive of each other, but they need to be supported as well. Family meetings are a good way to keep everyone informed of each other's needs and feelings. From these meetings families may begin to delegate responsibilities and help make sure needs are being met. It may also be a way to delegate the emotional needs of the family. If a parent or guardian is not able to provide the nurturing the family needs at this time, perhaps a grandparent, aunt, uncle, or close family friend may fill the void until the parent or guardian is able to resume that role.

One of the most important things to help hold a family together at this time is communication. Every member of the family should feel free to discuss his or her feelings about life without the child; beliefs about the circumstances leading to the loss; and, in the case of a missing child, beliefs about the status of the child. Often family members will hesitate to be honest about their thoughts and feelings for fear of hurting another family member. Everyone should be encouraged to express him- or herself honestly.

Family members should also have a place to discuss thoughts and feelings outside of the family environment. Age-appropriate support groups are an excellent resource for children, and counseling with a qualified professional may assist all family members during this extremely difficult time. All therapists used by the family should have an advanced degree in a recognized mental-health specialty such as psychiatry, psychology, social work, counseling, or psychiatric nursing. Advanced degrees are master's degrees (MSW, MS, MA) and doctorates (MD, PhD, PsyD). It is important for the counseling professional to be licensed in the jurisdiction where they practice.

It is also important to remember this is not a good time to make major decisions or life changes. Stability and consistency are two fundamental elements in family support at this time. Also decisions made during the time of crisis are influenced by the crisis and may be inappropriate and difficult to change or correct once the crisis has passed.

All family members are entitled to periodic breaks from the loss. Afternoon outings, short vacations, and fun events may be necessary to balance the intensity of the grief faced. When taking a break, family members need to know it is OK to have fun and not think about the loss for this period of time. To help with this step families may, however, want to make arrangements to be contacted in case of an emergency. If family members experience guilt about having fun while the child cannot, they should talk about those feelings with their support network after the outing.

Also family members need to know holidays and special occasions may evoke memories of the child. Events such as birthdays, annual seasonal activities, and graduations may be difficult family times. Encourage open discussion of feelings at this time, and create a simple ritual or new tradition to include the missing child in the event. For example starting the holiday meal with a small serving of the child's favorite dessert as a toast allows for thoughts, memories, and discussion and honors the child.

Professional Considerations and Considering Professionals

While this section is intended to provide information to professionals who counsel families experiencing the loss of a child, it is also written to provide families with information as to what to expect and request of a professional who is counseling them.

Above all else a professional must provide a safe space and the language to work through this grief. The counseling environment should be free of judgment or expectations. In many ways the accepted mental-health models and rules don't apply in these cases, and the professional may need to be open to new ways of coping unique to these cases. In that process be sure to **refer to the child by name, and use the child's name often during counseling sessions.**

Family members may only have the energy and resources to focus on the child. Delving into other family issues such as negative coping mechanisms and historical family patterns is not helpful in this moment and may lead the family to disengage from counseling.

Family members may need a safe place to explore their issues of guilt, as well as exploring all the possible scenarios of what happened or may be happening to a child who is still missing. This is necessary as a preparation for the unknown information that may develop. It is not important how irrational this guilt or these scenarios may sound, family members must have a place in which to verbalize and explore them.

The other extreme is family members may deny the possibility of a negative outcome in a still-evolving case or the pain they are experiencing. Knowing it will be safe to talk about those things in the future is in itself supportive.

Understand, in the case of a missing child, family members may need to perceive the future from a dual perspective of a future without the child and a future should the child return. One perspective may be immediately predominant

after the child has been reported missing, and the other may become predominant over time. There may always be two possible futures for the family of a missing child.

Reality testing may help family members see the larger picture. For example asking, "Staying out all night looking for your child may result in poor job performance and eventual firing. How will that help or hurt the situation? Is there a compromise to meet most of your needs?"

Don't attempt to fit family members into any established model of grief or intervention. Assist family members in finding the coping mechanisms, behaviors, and belief systems best for them in this moment. Long-term interventions may not be appropriate at this time.

Know your own feelings and thoughts about children who are no longer with their families and the possible outcomes. Know where your personal feelings may support or interfere with family members. Know your own limits and use clinical supervision often when working with family members who are experiencing this type of loss.

Additional Thoughts

NCMEC understands one brochure may not cover or provide for all of the grief experienced by families. NCMEC's goal is to provide available support to families as they adjust to their changed world. This brochure is but one of these supports. For additional information about support services provided by NCMEC please contact the Family Advocacy Division (FAD) by e-mail at familyadvocacy@ncmec.org or telephone toll-free at 1-877-446-2632 extension 8373.

FAD provides case-specific intervention designed to enhance service delivery to the families served by NCMEC. Staffed by master-level, trained, child-welfare professionals, FAD proactively works with families, law enforcement, social-service agencies, other family-advocacy agencies, and legal professionals to provide

technical assistance regarding reunification practices for missing children, training, referrals, support, and crisis-intervention services. FAD also coordinates the Family Advocacy Outreach Network, a proactive initiative designed to partner with licensed treatment professionals throughout the United States who are able to provide brief therapeutic intervention or long-term support on a *pro-bono* or sliding-fee scale basis to families served by NCMEC.

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® (NCMEC) was established in 1984 as a private, nonprofit organization. Per 42 U.S.C. § 5773 and other federal legislation NCMEC fulfills 20 core federal mandates including the operation of a national, 24-hour, toll-free telephone line by which individuals may report information regarding the location of a missing child and request information about the procedures necessary to reunite a child with his or her legal custodian; operation of the national resource center and information clearinghouse for missing and sexually exploited children; coordination of programs to locate, recover, or reunite missing children with their families; provision of technical assistance and training in the prevention, investigation, prosecution, and treatment of cases involving missing and sexually exploited children; and operation of a CyberTipline® for reporting Internet-related, child sexual exploitation.

A 24-hour, toll-free telephone line, **1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678)**, is available in Canada and the United States for those who have information regarding missing and sexually exploited children. The “phone free” number is 001-800-843-5678 when dialing from Mexico and 00-800-0843-5678 when dialing from many other countries. For a list of other toll-free numbers available when dialing from specific countries visit www.missingkids.com, and from

the home page respectively click on the “More Services” and “24-Hour Hotline” links. The CyberTipline is available worldwide for online reporting of these crimes at www.cybertipline.com. The TDD line is 1-800-826-7653. The NCMEC business number is 703-224-2150. The NCMEC facsimile number is 703-224-2122. The NCMEC website address is www.missingkids.com.

For information about the services offered by NCMEC’s other offices, please call them directly in California at 714-508-0150, Florida at 561-848-1900, Florida/Collier County at 239-566-5801, New York/Buffalo at 716-842-6333, New York/Mohawk Valley at 315-732-7233, New York/Rochester at 585-242-0900, and Texas at 512-465-2156.

To learn more about the existence and nature of other programs being carried out by federal agencies to assist missing and sexually exploited children and their families visit www.ncjrs.gov or call 1-800-851-3420 to obtain *Federal Resources on Missing and Exploited Children* (NCJ 216857).

A number of NCMEC publications, addressing various aspects of the missing- and sexually exploited-child issue, are available free-of-charge in single copies by contacting the



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This brochure was written by Duane T. Bowers, LPC. Additional information may be obtained by ordering a copy of *When Your Child Is Missing: A Family Survival Guide* (NCJ 204958) by visiting www.ncjrs.gov or calling 1-800-851-3420.

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