

Family members may need a safe place to explore their issues of guilt, as well as exploring all of the possible scenarios of what has happened or is happening to their child. 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 might also be experienced where family members deny the possibility of a negative outcome or situation of their child or the pain they are experiencing. Knowing it will be safe to talk about those things in the future is in itself supportive.

Understand, regardless of how long the child is missing, 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 or lost, 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 that will meet most of your needs?"

Don't attempt to fit family members of a missing child 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 a missing child and the possible outcomes of that situation. 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 of a missing child.

Additional Thoughts

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children understands one brochure cannot cover or provide for all of the grief experienced by families of a missing child. Our goal is to provide you with whatever support we may as you adjust to your permanently changed world. This brochure is but one of these supports.

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® (NCMEC), established in 1984 as a private, nonprofit organization, serves as a clearinghouse of information about missing and exploited children; provides technical assistance to the public and law-enforcement agencies; offers training programs to law-enforcement and social-service professionals; distributes photographs of and descriptions about missing children worldwide; creates and coordinates child-protection education and prevention programs and publications; coordinates child-protection efforts with the private sector; networks with nonprofit service providers and state clearinghouses regarding missing-child cases; and provides information about effective legislation to help ensure the protection of

children per 42 U.S.C. §§ 5771 *et seq.*; 42 U.S.C. § 11606; and 22 C.F.R. § 94.6.

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 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 homepage click on the link to "More Services" and then on the link to "24-Hour Hotline." The CyberTipline® is available worldwide for online reporting of these crimes at www.cybertipline.com. The TTY line is 1-800-826-7653. The NCMEC business number when dialing in the United States is 703-274-3900. The NCMEC business number when dialing from other countries is 001-703-522-9320. The NCMEC facsimile number is 703-274-2200. The NCMEC web-site address is www.missingkids.com.

For information about the services offered by our NCMEC offices, please call them directly in California at 714-508-0150, Florida at 561-848-1900, Kansas City at 816-756-5422, New York at 585-242-0900, and South Carolina at 803-254-2326.

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



Charles B. Wang International Children's Building
699 Prince Street
Alexandria, Virginia 22314-3175
U.S.A.

Copyright © 1987 and 2005 National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC). All rights reserved.

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* from the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse at 1-800-851-3420 or www.ncjrs.org.

This project was supported by Grant No. 2005-MC-CX-K024 awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice. National Center for Missing & Exploited Children®, 1-800-THE-LOST®, and CyberTipline® are registered service marks of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children.

 Printed on recycled paper.



**Information
for families
grieving
after the
loss of a
child and
the professionals
who support them**

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children®

**1-800-THE-LOST®
(1-800-843-5678)**

www.missingkids.com



OJJDP Office of Juvenile Justice
and Delinquency Prevention
Office of Justice Programs • U.S. Department of Justice

Information for families grieving after the loss of a child 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 grief includes every possible human emotion. When the loss is your child, those feelings and emotions may be overwhelming, and the process of adjusting to the loss of your child may seem impossible. The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children created this brochure to help you remember you are not alone and provide information about what to expect in your grieving process.

Everyone grieves differently, and everyone reacts to the pain of loss differently. You, your husband/wife/significant other, brother, sister, parents, other children, and close family friends will react to the loss or death of your child differently. Some will react emotionally. Others will cope with the loss by doing things and keeping active. Others will mentally analyze this situation of loss until they find some good in the situation, no matter how small. One feels, one does, and the other one thinks. No one way is better than the other. Each way is just different. The best support to receive and give to others is to recognize they are grieving as you are but in a different way. How we grieve should never be judged. Give yourself, your family members, and your close friends the time they need to grieve and feel the pain of that grief.

The Process of Grief

As you grieve for your missing child, you will find feelings seem to be nearly overwhelming. One of the best ways to be sure those feelings don't overwhelm you is to talk about your child, your grief, and your feelings. Find people who will listen such as friends, clergy members, and coworkers. As you talk, be sure to share not only the memories of your child, but your expecta-

tations, dreams, and hopes for him or her as well. Also there are some experiences you should expect in the process of grief.

- It may seem as if your mind continues to look for your child. You may think you see him or her 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 child. Each time you rediscover it isn't your child, it may hurt.
- You may find yourself doing things for your child out of habit such as looking for his or her laundry, setting a place at the table, planning activities he or she will enjoy, calling out to remind him or her to go to bed. Again, each time you realize your child is gone, it may hurt.
- Each family member has a role defined by the things he or she does. Your child 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 child may have had a specific schedule for activities at school or activities in the evening or on weekends. You will need to adjust to a new schedule that no longer includes your child.
- These roles are also defined by how family members interact with one another. What role did your child fill? Was he or she the smart, quiet, clumsy, mischievous, lazy, generous, thoughtful, and/or stubborn one, or did your child fulfill some other role? You came to count on that role in your family and will now have to view your family without it.
- You may find it difficult to eat and sleep. 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.

- Your normal daily tasks may now seem 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 find you aren't completing the entire task, you will know you have accomplished some of it. Congratulate yourself for what you did accomplish.

Remember every member of your family will be having these experiences to some degree. Talking with them about your own experiences helps them understand they are not alone and what they are thinking and feeling is "normal."

Supporting the Family

Finding the emotional and physical energy to support the rest of your family at this time may be difficult. Your spouse/significant other, other children, extended family members, and close family friends may all try to be supportive, but need to be supported as well. Family meetings are a good way to keep everyone informed of each person'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 as well. If you are not able to

provide the nurturing your family needs at this time, perhaps a grandparent, aunt, uncle, or close family friend may fill that role until you are able to resume.

One of the most important things to help hold your 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 missing child and beliefs about the status of the missing 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 member of the clergy or other counseling professional may assist all adult family members during this extremely difficult time.

It is also important to remember this is not a good time to make major decisions or changes in your life or the life of your family. Stability and consistency are two fundamental elements in the support of your family 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.

You and your family are entitled to periodic breaks from the situation. Afternoon outings, short vacations, and fun events are necessary to balance the intensity of the situation you and your family are facing. When you do take a break, allow your family to know it is OK to have fun and not think about the situation for this period of time. You can make arrangements to be contacted in an emergency. You may experience guilt

about having fun while your missing child cannot, and you should talk about those feelings to your support network after the outing.

Also know holidays and special occasions will involve memories of your missing child. Events such as birthdays, annual seasonal activities, and graduations may be difficult times for your family. 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 of missing children, it is also written to provide families with information as to what to expect and request of a professional who is counseling you.

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 situations of missing or lost children, and the professional may need to be open to new ways of coping unique to this situation. In that process be sure to **refer to the missing child by name, and use the child's name often during counseling sessions.**

Family members may only have the energy and resources to work on the situation at hand—their missing 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.