Celebrating Christmas: A Guide for Bereaved Parents

Christmas can be particularly challenging for bereaved parents. This guide offers compassionate advice to help you navigate Christmas and the festive season as a bereaved parent and suggests ways to include your child if you choose to take part in the festivities.

Understanding and Acknowledging Your Emotions

It's natural for Christmas to bring up a range of emotions, including some that can be conflicting. This is normal, and a natural part of grief. You may feel:

- Sadness that your child is no longer here to join in the celebrations with you.
- Yearning for the Christmas and experiences you had planned with your child.
- Loneliness from feeling isolated in your grief when everyone else is celebrating.
- Anger or resentment that others can celebrate with their children when you can't.
- Guilt for joining in with celebrations and feeling joy.

It's important to give yourself permission to experience these emotions. Allow yourself to feel each emotion, knowing that grief does not follow a schedule or set pattern. You can mourn and celebrate in your own way, without needing to meet others' expectations or compare yourself to others.

Deciding How to Approach Christmas

Deciding whether to or how to celebrate Christmas is very personal, and only you will know what feels right for you. Here are some considerations that might help with your decision:

- **Reflect on What Feels Right:** Take a moment to consider what feels most comfortable for you this year. You may decide to participate in Christmas traditions, try something entirely new, or even choose not to take part in the celebrations altogether. You can also change how you celebrate each year if your preferences change, or if you want to try something new.

- **Communicate Your Needs:** Let friends and family know how you're feeling and what kind of support you need. Let them know if you prefer to avoid certain events or if you need their support in different ways, such as if you'd appreciate them doing something special to honour your child's memory.

- **Be Flexible:** Grief can change day by day. Give yourself the freedom to adapt your plans as the season unfolds. If something feels too difficult, it's okay to step back and take time for yourself. Likewise, you can choose to join in at the last minute.

- **Consider Potential Triggers:** Think about specific aspects of Christmas that might be particularly challenging for you, such as the emphasis placed on children and family at Christmas or emotional songs and films. Evaluate whether you feel prepared to face these potential triggers and your coping strategies if things get difficult.

Ways to Include Your Child (If You Choose to Celebrate)

Including your child in your Christmas traditions can be hugely comforting and a source of connection. Ideas include:

- **Lighting a Candle:** Light a candle for your child. Some parents light candles on Christmas Eve or Christmas morning as a way to include their child.

- **Dedicate a Special Ornament:** You could make or buy a special ornament in honour of your child. You can hang this on your Christmas tree or put it somewhere special in your home.

- **Make a Donation or Donate Toys in Their Name:** Instead of buying gifts for your child, some bereaved parents choose to donate the toys they would've bought to other children in need, to hospital units or give a financial donation to charity. It can be a beautiful way to honour your child's memory and keep their legacy alive.

- **Using Their Name:** Include your child's name on Christmas cards and gift tags that you give to friends and family.

It is important to let your family and friends know if you would like them to include your child at Christmas. Friends and family may avoid talking about your child because they do not want to upset you, however we know that many bereaved parents want to make sure their child in included. By letting friends and family know your preferences, they will be able to support you as well as possible. You could do this through social media, a group message or by writing a note in the Christmas cards you distribute.

Alternative Celebrations

For some families, traditional Christmas activities might feel too painful. You could consider alternative ways to spend the season that might bring some comfort:

- **Take Some Time Away:** Consider spending Christmas away from home, perhaps somewhere quiet, in nature or in a special place. Some parents find peace in a retreat away from the usual celebrations.

- **Create a Memory Day:** Set aside a day during the holiday season just to honour your child. You could visit a favourite place, share memories and photos with friends and family or do a special activity in their honour.

- **Plant Bulbs:** Planting bulbs that will bloom in spring can be a beautiful way of remembering your child. You can ask family or friends to join you in planting the bulbs. They could even be planted in a heart shape to remember your heart warrior.

- **Volunteer:** If you feel up to it, volunteering can be a meaningful way to remember your child over the festive period. Serving meals, delivering toys, or helping those in need can offer a comforting sense of purpose and connection.

- **Treat Christmas Day Like Any Other Day:** If you are really struggling, there is no rule saying that you have to mark the day. You can just treat the 25th December like any other day, and stick to your normal routine.

Seeking Support

Navigating Christmas as a bereaved parent can be challenging and emotional, and it's important to seek support when needed:

- **Join a Support Group:** Connecting with other bereaved parents who understand your pain can provide comfort and validation. Tiny Tickers offers monthly bereavement support groups through Zoom, led by a qualified facilitator.

- **Professional Counselling:** Consider seeking help from a grief counsellor or therapist who specialises in loss. They can offer guidance and coping strategies tailored to your needs.

- **Lean on Loved Ones:** Don't hesitate to reach out to friends and family who can provide a listening ear or a shoulder to cry on.

Although some support services will close over the Christmas period, there are several places where support will be available throughout the season. One of these is the Child Death Helpline, which is open 365 days a year and can be contacted by calling 0800 282 986.

Looking After Yourself

Over the festive season, it is easy to fall out of your usual routine, which can have an impact on how you look after yourself. Maintaining key points of your normal routine, such as eating and drinking at regular times, or keeping to a regular sleep schedule can help when you are grieving. Ensuring you get outside during the daylight hours, even for a short while can be hugely beneficial for both your mental and physical health. Alcohol can play a big part in Christmas celebrations, however it is important to be aware of the impact of alcohol on your mental health. You may choose to limit your alcohol consumption over this emotional time, or avoid alcohol completely, instead opting for non-alcoholic alternatives.

Some bereaved parents still feel able to fully participate and enjoy Christmas, whereas others may not want to take part at all. Remember that however you feel is ok, and you should not feel guilty either way.

What has helped other parents?

We asked other bereaved parents what they found helpful and how they choose to celebrate Christmas. The plans and experiences vary between each person, showing that there is no right or wrong way to celebrate Christmas as a bereaved parent. We hope that reading their experiences might help you decide whether to celebrate, give you ideas of how you could include your child at Christmas, and help you to know that you are not alone.

Louise, Jessica's Mum

"We've gone away for Christmas most years since Jessica died. It helped us to be somewhere different where we could spend the day quietly, get out for a walk and not have pressure from anyone else to celebrate in a particular way. We always hang a stocking for Jessica and are lucky that some family and friends include a little gift for her (a tree ornament or something that is in her memory) which goes in the stocking along with little bits the children can share. Our tree has a lot of little ornaments which are special because they're either something Jessica made, or something that is in memory of her and we have a special angel on top of the tree which looks like her. I also make a special Christmas wreath each year to take to her grave and we go to a special remembrance service at the woodland burial ground. I also include Jessica's name in every card that we send.

"This year will be our second Christmas at home since she died. The last Christmas we spent at home, we had a quiet day at home and took Jessica's stocking to her grave to open it there and share Christmas with her in that way.

"For me, being open and talking about Jessica helps as does having space to do Christmas in a way that feels right for us as a family without the pressure of other people's expectations of how we should do Christmas.

"For anyone struggling with Christmas, I would say be gentle with yourself and give yourself the space you need. We do feel the need as a family to make Christmas special and magical for our other children but there is always a balance - the acknowledgment and space for sadness that Jessica isn't there to share it and then trying to make the happy memories for my other children. It isn't easy but we get through as best we can. Much love to everyone else who finds Christmas hard."

Samantha, Logan's Mum

"For the first few years we didn't really do Christmas cards as it was strange not having Logan's name on it. Especially now we have his 2 sisters now too. But we have baubles or decorations on the tree with his name and pictures on so he's always with us. We're thinking now [the] girls are 8 almost 9 to start letting them choose a bauble/decoration each year to add to the tree.

"We usually go up to Logan's grave Xmas morning if there's time (I know that sounds bad) as we do presents at ours then to my parents then we all head to my aunties for dinner. If we don't go

then my dad will take the girls up to let us finish helping mum get food ready."

Abby, Francis' Mum

"Francis died a week before his first Christmas. We went through the motions of Christmas day because if we hadn't I don't think we would've ever celebrated Christmas again. We opened the presents we'd wrapped for him and ate Christmas dinner, but there was no celebration or joy.

"On subsequent Christmases, we have tried to celebrate as we would if Francis was still here. We buy him presents for his friends and family to play with at our house. We decorate his grave and have special decorations on the Christmas tree that remind us of him. We also include him in any family photos we take.

"We send our Christmas cards out early and add a note asking for Francis' name to be included in any cards or gifts that we receive. The most hurtful thing to us is when people don't include Francis, so we remind our family and friends of this every year."

Tilly-may Smith, Beau's Mum

"We have decided to take a small pink Christmas tree up to her grave side where her sister can hang a special bauble on it, We have two special baubles at home, one that has her picture in and one we made with her in martins house using her finger prints to make snowmen.

"On Christmas morning once Perri has unwrapped her gifts we plan to visit Beau's garden (that's what we call her grave it sounds less morbid) Perri requested we buy Beau a rattle so we've had one personalised for her, we plan to take it up wrapped on Christmas Eve once Perri is asleep so Perri still thinks Santa has visited her sister and then we'll let her unwrap it the next morning for her sister once we get up there.

"Myself and Sam have also decided we are going to take our Christmas dinner up to Beaus garden with our fold up chairs and eat our Christmas dinner up there with her."

Sarah, Isaac's Mum

"We couldn't do Christmas at all the 1st year so we went on holiday. Every Christmas since, we go to Isaac's resting place and we take up a poinsettia plant for him. He has a place card at the family Christmas table."

Natalie, Sophie's Mum

"I am going to work. Not sure how that will go because this is my first Christmas back at work since Sophie died. But none of us feel like celebrating even though we are approaching our third Christmas without her. She would be 4 now and this would probably have been the first year she would have understood a little bit."

Gemma, Mabon's Mum

"Although we lost Mabon a week before Christmas last year it feels like this will be our first proper one as we were still in Alder Hey over Christmas. I am dreading it to be honest and the thought of putting the tree and decorations gives me a huge feeling of sadness as it feels like it symbolises the sad time we went through.

"I know that we still have to do things for our daughter Elsi and because Mabon was still with us December last year in hospital we have lots of special things. The nurses made him snowflakes for his room which I laminated and a sign saying Mabon's grotto so we are going to put these on his bedroom door at home. We have a Christmas tree to go outside his door with blue decorations and blue lights as that was his favourite colour. The nurses were amazing at doing elf on the shelf so we decided that would be another tradition in memory of Mabon. His presents are still in his stocking unopened from last year so we will leave them in. We will also put some presents in his sack like board games that we can use as a family. We have a special area in our garden for Mabon as someone bought us a tree after he passed (his ashes are still in the house) so I have bought some lights and ornaments for there. I am also going to get a small real tree in the hope it will continue to grow over the years. We will also probably put a candle on his space at the table and raise a glass. We are hoping people might write Christmas cards for his stocking.

"As the build up to Christmas is already difficult, then his anniversary and Christmas Day we have booked to go away for a couple of nights over New Year as I felt I couldn't cope being home then as well after dealing with everything else. I have also bought his sister Elsi something from Mabon."

Jade, Clay's Mum

"This is our first Christmas without Clay. We have booked the week away I just can't be home. My mother in law keeps making me feel bad for not being here telling me that she going to visit his grave Xmas day. It's hard enough as it is without people saying what we should be doing. However I have bought an ornament for the tree and instead of our normal Christmas lights we have changed to blue in his memory."

Final Thoughts

The journey through grief, especially over the Christmas period, is very personal and often overwhelming, and it can take time to decide what is right for you. Be patient with yourself, and don't be afraid to reach out for support when you need it. Remember that there is no right or wrong way to navigate this time. Do what feels most meaningful and comforting to you.

Wishing you a peaceful festive season from everyone at Tiny Tickers.

Other resources

The Tiny Tickers Facebook support group for bereaved heart parents is a supportive and understanding community of those who understand the loss of a child. We welcome you to join **here.**

Our website contains information and advice on navigating loss **here.**

As part of our Family Experience video series, parents discuss their experiences of dealing with bereavement. Watch the video **here**.

Many bereaved parents find comfort in creating an online tribute page after losing a child. This space, like an online memory box, can be filled with memories (photos, music and videos) and shared with family and friends. You can also light candles, write messages and give gifts. It is possible to use this page to fundraise in memory of your child, but this is by no means obligatory. You can create your free tribute page **here**.