Navigating Missed Milestones (Starting Nursery and School): A Guide for Bereaved Parents

The pain of losing a child is profound and enduring, and missing milestones can heighten this grief—such as the time when your child should have been starting nursery or school. These moments can feel like fresh reminders of what could have been. This guide aims to offer compassionate advice to help you navigate the emotions of missed milestones, suggesting ways to mark these special days and keep your child's memory alive. This guide focuses on the milestone of your child starting school or nursery, however the topics covered can be applied to many different milestones you may experience.

Acknowledging Your Emotions

Missed milestones can evoke a range of powerful emotions:

- **Grief and Sadness:** Deep sorrow and mourning for the experiences you were looking forward to sharing with your child.
- **Anger and Frustration:** Feelings of injustice and anger about the loss of opportunities and experiences.
- **Guilt:** Wondering if there's more you could have done or feeling guilty for any moments of happiness despite the loss.
- **Longing and Nostalgia:** Intense yearning for the presence of your child and memories of times spent together.

It's essential to recognise that these feelings are a natural part of your grieving process. Allow yourself to feel them fully, without judgment or pressure to "move on".

Navigating Nursery or School Milestones

These particular milestones can be especially challenging. Here are some ideas to help you through these significant days:

- **Donate or Volunteer:** Make a donation or volunteer your time to a nursery, school, or children's charity. This can be a positive way to honour your child's memory.
- **Write a Letter:** Write a letter to your child expressing your thoughts, feelings, and memories. This can be a therapeutic way to feel connected and to process your emotions.
- **Perform Acts of Kindness:** On the day your child would have started nursery or school, perform acts of kindness in their name. This could be something small like paying for someone's coffee or something larger like organising a charity drive.
- **Visit a Special Place:** Spend time in a location that holds special memories of your child, or even just a quiet place where you feel close to them.
- **Celebrate Their Life:** Gather with close family and friends to share stories, photos, and memories of your child. Celebrating their life can provide comfort and remind you of the joy they brought into your life.

Keeping Your Child's Memory Alive

Incorporating your child's memory into your daily life can help maintain a sense of closeness and continuity:

- **Memory Box:** Keep a special box filled with your child's belongings, photos, letters, or any items that remind you of them. Open it whenever you need to feel close to your child.
- **Daily Rituals:** Include small daily rituals to remember your child, such as lighting a candle or looking at pictures of your child.
- **Artistic Expressions:** Create art, music, or writing inspired by your child. These expressions can be therapeutic and a beautiful way to honour their memory.
- **Special Reminders:** Wear a piece of jewellery, carry a keepsake, or display a photo that reminds you of your child. These tangible reminders can provide comfort throughout your day.

Seeking Support

Navigating the emotions of missed milestones can be incredibly difficult. 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 offer 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, a shoulder to cry on, or simply companionship during difficult times.

What has helped other parents?

We asked other bereaved parents about what they found helpful when reaching these milestones:

"We donated some books to a local primary school to mark the time when Francis would've started school. Each book is stamped to say that it is donated in Francis' memory. The school were so grateful, and have stayed in touch throughout the year to let us know how appreciated the books are." - Abby, Francis' Mum

"It's okay to survive and not thrive - and take extra time to process all of the emotions that missed milestones create. I personally reach out to my inner circle to let them know I'm struggling more on these occasions, so they're aware that it's a harder time for me. Having that support system around you is so crucial." - Kayla, Isabella's Mum

"I knew I would struggle seeing all the 'back to school' pictures posted on social media, so I decided to take a social media break for the first few weeks of September." - Oliver, Francis' Dad

Final Thoughts

The journey through grief and missed milestones is deeply personal and often overwhelming. Remember that there is no right or wrong way to honour your child's memory. Do what feels most meaningful and comforting to you. Be kind to yourself as you navigate this path, and know that your child's memory is forever cherished in your heart.

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**.