Navigating Your Child's Birthday: A Guide for Bereaved Parents

Birthdays are significant milestones, and can be particularly challenging for bereaved parents. Days like birthdays can hold a range of different memories depending on your experiences surrounding the birth of your child. For some, memories will be happy, whilst for others, the memories may be traumatic or triggering. Either way, the deep emotions associated with your child's birthday and the memories can intensify your grief. This guide aims to help you navigate your child's birthday and celebrate in a way that feels right to you while honouring your grief, and help you to look after your own wellbeing.

Acknowledging Your Emotions

It's normal to experience a wide range of emotions, both in the run-up to your child's birthday and on the day itself. This is a natural part of grief. You may feel:

- Sadness as you miss your child and the celebrations you should have shared together
- Anxiety as their birthday approaches, and you may feel increasingly worried about the day, how you will feel, and how your wider family and friends will react
- Anger or frustration because of the unfairness of your loss, and because your child isn't here to celebrate
- Guilt for wanting to celebrate your child, despite your grief
- Enhanced grief and trauma, especially if you had a traumatic birth or postnatal period with your heart baby
- Comfort and connection by finding ways to feel close to your child, celebrate their life, and reflect on happy memories

It's important to give yourself permission to experience all of your emotions without judgment.

Self Care Strategies

Taking care of yourself is especially important around emotional times, such as birthdays. It is important to maintain basic self-care, including eating and drinking. Rest is important, especially if you find your sleep is impacted by your grief. It's okay to set boundaries and to decline invitations or step away from situations that feel too difficult. Be open and honest with your friends and family, and explain to them when things feel challenging. Allow yourself to feel all of your emotions without judgment or expectation. Joy and grief can co-exist, and this is important to remember, especially around times like birthdays when you may be reflecting on happy memories alongside your grief.

Deciding How to Approach the Day

Some bereaved parents choose to mark their child's birthday with celebrations, while others prefer a quieter day of remembrance. There is no right or wrong approach. It is important to reflect on what feels right for you and what feels most comfortable for you this year. You can change your mind about how you mark your child's birthday each year if your preferences change, or if you want to try something new.

Communicating your needs and letting friends and family know how you're feeling and what you need will help them provide you with the best support. Let them know if you prefer to keep to yourselves on birthdays, if you'd like them to check in or if you need their support, such as if you'd appreciate them doing something special to honour your child's memory.

Remember that grief can change day by day. Give yourself the freedom to adapt your plans. If something feels too difficult, it's okay to step back and take time for yourself. Likewise, you can choose to join in or make plans at the last minute.

Planning for the Day

Many bereaved parents find comfort in finding ways to honour their child on their birthday, or finding a tradition that they can repeat each year:

- Bake a birthday cake: Some families like to enjoy a cake and sing "Happy Birthday" to their child
- Visit a special place: If you have a special place that reminds you of your child, visiting can help you feel connected to them
- Plant something in their memory: Planting a tree, bulbs or seeds that you can watch grow throughout the year can be a beautiful way to feel connected to your child
- Make a donation or sponsorship: Instead of buying birthday presents, some families find comfort in requesting donations to a charity in their child's name or naming something after them, such as a star or tree dedication
- Acts of Kindness: You can do acts of kindness in your child's name, such as paying for someone's coffee or complimenting a stranger
- Write to your child: Write a card or letter to your child expressing your feelings and what you wish you could tell them
- Start a project: Begin a project that honours their memory or reflects their personality and interests. This could be a craft, fundraiser or activity that reminds you of your child

Supporting Your Partner and Family

If you have a partner or other children, remember that you all may experience birthdays and your grief differently. It is important to talk openly as a family about how you are all feeling to ensure that you can be supportive and supported by each other. Consider whether you want to spend the day together or have some time alone, and remember to be patient with each other if you have different ways of coping and spending the day.

Loooking After Your Mental Health

Navigating your child's birthday can be emotionally overwhelming:

- Join a Support Group: Connecting with other bereaved parents who understand your experience 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, particularly around significant dates. 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 support during this time

Parent Experiences

Emmi Lou, Holly's Mum

"As a family, we decided after Holly's 1st birthday to celebrate her birthday as she would [have] liked. Her birthday is New Year's Eve, so we now go away as a family and do something she would [have] loved. It is nice to remember her birthday [by] doing something positive and is a good distraction from sitting at home."

Gemma, Mabon's Mum

"For Mabon's birthday we did a colourful bedsheets appeal for PICU Alder Hey as it meant so much to us when they would always make sure his bed had lovely sheets. On his birthday we will take them to Alder Hey. I have also bought some colouring books and sensory toys to donate from us as a family since we can't buy him gifts. We also asked people to make and hide rocks with his name on so other people would think of him.

"On Saturday we had an early party with friends and family. Mabon didn't have his Paw Patrol cake last year as he was still poorly so we had it in his honour along with his favourite foods. It's always hard to know what to do and sometimes it can be a battle wanting to mark occasions but also still struggling."

Abby, Francis' Mum

"Francis' first birthday fell during Covid restrictions, and so we baked cakes and biscuits and dropped them off for friends and family on his birthday. Then asked people to send us photos of them enjoying the treats. It was a great way of keeping ourselves distracted and busy on Francis' birthday.

"In the years since, we have planned a nice family day out for his birthday and a meal with his grandparents. As his birthday is in the summer, we also have a garden party for him where we

invite family and friends to celebrate Francis and his legacy. We write on the invitations that the party will be a celebration, and that we welcome birthday presents in the form of donations to Tiny Tickers, flowers or toys that his friends can play with at our house if people would like to give a gift. We find that it is helpful to tell people how you would prefer to celebrate as ultimately the majority of people want to be able to support you.

“We have had some friends and family who have not wanted to join in the celebrations or acknowledge Francis’ birthday, and that is always painful. However we will continue to celebrate our wonderful boy each year on his birthday.”

Final Thoughts

Your child's birthday may always bring complex emotions, and that's okay. There's no time limit on grief, and each year may feel different. Your love for your child continues, and how you choose to acknowledge their birthday is a personal choice. Whatever feels right for you is valid.

It is important to take each moment as it comes, be gentle with yourself, and know that both grief and celebration can coexist as you honour your precious child and celebrate them on their birthday in a way that feels right for you.

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**.