

SUPPORTING CHILDREN DEALING WITH GRIEF DURING THE HOLIDAYS: TIPS TO HELP

National Organization Comforting Families of the Fallen Offers Advice to Help All Who Are Grieving

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

December 2, 2008

WASHINGTON – The holidays can be a magical time of year, but for children who have recently lost a parent, sibling, or another significant person in their lives, the holiday season can be an emotional minefield. It can also pose challenges for their still grieving surviving parents and other family members.

“The holiday season can be particularly difficult for families with bereaved children because children carry their own expectations about the holidays, as well as their own grief over the loss,” said Bonnie Carroll, the founder and chairman of the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, TAPS. “The holiday season can be a painful time for a bereaved child, but it can also be an opportunity to honor and remember the person who died and the legacy that special person left for that child.”

For more than a decade, TAPS has helped surviving families of those who have died in military service, including Good Grief Camps attended by thousands of children and teens. TAPS and Carroll offer the following tips to help families supporting a bereaved child over the holidays:

Talk with your child about the holiday season. Anticipating the holiday, especially if it’s the first holiday without a family member, can be worse than the actual holiday. Talk with your child about their feelings and expectations for the holiday season. Discuss the activities your child would like to participate in or attend.

Even if your child does not talk about the loss often with you, do not expect for your child to be “over it.” Children grieve on their own timeline and differently from adults. Significant milestones, such as the first holiday after the loss, may cause the child’s feelings about the loss to re-surface, even if the child has not talked about the loss for a long time.

Make holiday plans that help your child feel nurtured, emotionally safe, and comfortable. Review your plans for the holidays with your child. Spend the holidays where you and your child feel supported, nurtured, and comfortable.

Encourage your child to attend holiday functions. Consider attending holiday parties and activities, especially if you and your child will be able to spend time with supportive family members and friends. Make an escape plan in case the event is more than you or your child can handle, and trust your hosts to understand if you need to slip out.

Laughter, play and joy are good for your child. Children do not grieve continuously and they need to take breaks from grieving. Encourage your child to play, run, and do recreational activities he or she would normally do. Clowning around and laughing (which releases endorphins into the brain) are good for children.

Be observant about your child's emotions. Realize that familiar traditions, sights, smells, and even tastes, may be comforting to your child, or may jolt emotions for a bereaved child. Watch how your child responds to events and be ready to be supportive and to comfort your child.

Comfort items that remind the child of the loved one may help. Allowing your child to sleep in a favorite shirt that belonged to the person who died may offer comfort. Letting your child carry a special item that reminds him or her of the person who died may help the child feel connected with the person who died. Placing a special photograph of the child with the person who died or a holiday celebration in years past, may help the child.

Pay attention to your child's health. It's often difficult for adults and children alike who have experienced a recent loss to sleep. Make sure your child gets regular rest, eats well, and drink lots of water. Holiday treats are ok, but in moderation. Bedwetting, acting out, and nightmares may be symptoms of a child that is struggling. Talk with your medical care provider if you become concerned about your child's health.

Don't pretend your family has not experienced a loss. Let your child know that you also miss the person who died. Tell your child that you don't like that things can't be exactly like they were before the person died, and that you love your child. Children may need to hear this in order to feel it is permissible to discuss their own feelings.

Find sustenance for the soul. Your church, synagogue, mosque, or another faith community may offer services, resources and support networks to help you and your child through the holiday season.

Talk with your child about holiday traditions and how they will be observed this year. Some children insist that holiday customs remain exactly the same. Discuss with your child why he or she wants to hold onto a particular tradition or custom. Do not feel that you must do something because you have always done it that way, but consider your child's feelings when making a change. Talk with your child about any changes before they occur.

Stick to daily routines when possible. The holidays tend to cause a lot of upheaval in schedules and routines. The friends your child plays with may go out of town. Daily schedules your child is accustomed to change when schools close for the holidays. Try to keep your child on a regular bedtime routine and talk with your child about any schedule changes.

Allow your child to remember a lost loved one through a tribute. Light a candle together at dinner time to remember the person who died. Make a wreath with pictures and items that represent the things the lost loved one cared about and place it at the gravesite for the loved one. Hang an ornament on the tree that reminds the child of the loved one. Help your child offer a blessing at a holiday meal that honors the person who died. Create a picture or collage with your child, display a favorite photograph in your home, or let your child help you set a place at the dinner table to represent the loved one who died.

Help your child write a letter to the person who died that honors the legacy that person gave the child. Help your child write a letter to the person they love who died thanking him or her for the gifts the person gave to the child, the special things they would do together, and expressing how the child feels about the person. Some children may want to mail their letter to the person, take the letter to the cemetery, or "send it to heaven" on a helium-filled balloon.

Honor the lost loved one through a gift. Encourage your child to draw pictures or create gifts for others that are inspired by the memories of the person who died. Help your child make a donation to a charity or cause the loved one cared about. Consider volunteering as a family at the charity.

Use family connections to help your child. Connections with other family members can help your child feel comforted, loved, and safe. These family connections can also help you as a parent cope with the holidays. Encourage your child to build ties with other family members, but you may need to remain nearby to reassure your child with your presence.

For more tips on dealing with grief during the holidays, go to the TAPS website at www.taps.org.

TAPS is the national organization providing compassionate care for the families of America's fallen military heroes. TAPS provides peer-based emotional support, grief and trauma resources, seminars for adults, Good Grief Camps for children, case work assistance, and 24/7 crisis intervention care for all who have been affected by the death of a loved one serving in the Armed Forces. Services are provided free of charge. For more information go to www.taps.org or call the toll-free crisis line at 800.959.TAPS.

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