When I was young, my mother would often sing a lullaby with the refrain, “When the bough breaks/The cradle will fall/And down will come baby/Cradle and all.” Like most children, I never considered what might actually happen “when the bough breaks” in real life. This changed for me, though, when, as a college undergraduate, I found myself one night on a lonely country road. There I began trying to comprehend the loss of my older brother, who had just been killed in a car accident. The circumstances required me not only to cope with my own sense of grief but also to understand and respond to the intense trauma my mother and father were experiencing.

Since that night, I have considered both personally and professionally how parents respond when a child dies. Given both the complexity and gravity of that response, my hope is that this article will help family members, friends, and professionals better understand how the loss of a child affects parents and how to provide meaningful support.

For most bereaved parents, the consequences of the death of a child cannot adequately be expressed in words. One father said of his son’s death, “I don’t know if there’s a way of saying it—it’s like we were sent to hell.” Despite our efforts to empathize, those who have not experienced a child’s death cannot fully know what it is like. However, knowledge of parental bereavement and its dimensions can provide a helpful glimpse of understanding, as well as ideas for how to respond to parents’ needs when their child dies. Important issues include the effect on a parents’ sense of identity, the parents’ efforts to maintain a link with the deceased child, and the way the loss influences relationships in the family.

**Parental Identity and the Loss of a Child**

For most people, family relationships define who we are and how we identify ourselves. We do not identify ourselves simply as mothers, fathers, spouses, in-laws, or
grandparents, but as family members linked with specific people. For example, a graduate student once wrote in a paper on mothering: “I am not a mother of children. I am a mother of Adria-Candice-Michael-Lauren-Jonathan-Andrew.” For most parents, the meaning of one’s life as a mother or father is a central feature of personal identity. A child’s death challenges this sense of identity. Bereavement scholar Therese Rando makes this connection in stating, “the process of mourning for one’s child involves not only dealing with loss of the loved child, but with the loss of part of one’s self.”

**Loss of a Sense of Self**

Parents who identify strongly with their roles as mothers or fathers often experience a child’s death as a death of part of themselves. One father struggled to express the magnitude of what he felt had been lost after his son’s death:

_I really feel I lost a part of me. Part of me and part of [my wife]. Part of us was never going to be the same again. It was like taking the most valuable part of my body. It was like part of me died when he died and even worse. I don’t know how to say it in words._

This father equated the loss of his son to the loss of “the most valuable part of my body,” but the loss is almost indefinable because it removes feelings about himself as a parent. Dorothy Lee, an anthropologist, suggests that to bring a child into the world is “to take on a lifelong responsibility, a lifelong relationship.” At the heart of this relationship lies the parent-child bond. Bereaved parents often feel the loss of this bond in a deep, painful way. Some bereaved parents have said that the pain of the loss was so unbearable that they either wanted to die or seriously considered committing suicide to escape despair. The parent-child bond is incorporated in the parent’s sense of identity, and when that bond is severed by the child’s death, it may feel as if the parent’s life and identity have also ended.

Another feature of the parent-child attachment is that the bond between a parent and child involves a relationship with a specific figure who cannot be replaced. The parent may redirect parental energies to other relationships, but cannot substitute another person for the child who has been lost. Jean, whose son died, said:

_I miss listening to him sing. I miss sitting at the supper table and asking each other trivial historical questions. He was more willing than my other children are to play this little “let’s-exercise-our-brains” game with me. I miss the fun of doing that. I miss watching him roughhouse. I just miss all his little eccentricities._

Parents miss the opportunity to be a parent to a specific, beloved child when the child dies. One mother suggested, “there are certain unique things that I think every child, every person, has that maybe fill certain needs of ours.” Those unique aspects of a relationship disappear for a parent when a child dies.

**Alteration of a Parent’s Future**

A child’s death means the death of a portion of the parent’s future, as well. Parents are left to cope with the pain of what will never be. One mother, Carol, explained her feelings:

_[I lost] part of my future. My dreams of success for her. Those are all gone . . . all of those things I was looking forward to, and I was looking forward to being a grandparent. I had moved into a phase where everything my kids did had become so exciting because they’re such dynamic young people. To have that plucked right out of your life is not only losing the hugs, the kisses, the cards, the phone calls, and the physical-ness of that person; it is all of these dreams and hopes that you’ve talked about together._

The part of a mother or father’s future identity that belonged to fishing trips with a child or attendance at school performances vanishes. Tom likened his parental experience to working on a painting over a lifetime that reflected his likes, dislikes, abilities, wants for the future, and desires for his children. Then, referring to his child’s death, he said, “it felt as if someone had taken my painting, ripped it off the easel, put up a blank canvas and said, ‘You have to start over.’” Parents who have painted a portrait of what they envision for the future with their children are forced to change it when a child dies. Bereaved parents often ache for what their children will not be able to experience. This sense of loss is for the child and the parents’ hopes for the child. It may be difficult for bereaved parents to participate in activities reminding them of these passages their child will miss, while at other times parents seem to take comfort in seeing others close to the child, like siblings or friends, enjoy these occasions. A mother whose daughter passed away told...
of how difficult it was to help her son’s fiancée pick out a bridal gown because she felt that, “I should be doing that with my daughter.”

**Parental Bereavement and Deceased Children**

Recent research on bereavement has examined how parents function in relation to their deceased child. The continued relationship is important, although it has been common in the past to suggest that parents must somehow disengage themselves emotionally after a child’s loss in order to move on. While parents certainly must deal with the reality of being separated from the child, most bereaved parents make an effort to maintain a link with the deceased child. Understanding how and why bereaved parents do this is important in learning how to support those who have lost a child. Perhaps the greatest fear of parents who lose a child is that somehow they or others will forget the child. This and other reasons motivate parents to find ways to maintain a connection to the child, keep the child’s memory alive, and extend care to others that is meaningfully related to the deceased child.

**Maintaining Connections**

Many parents will “search” for the missing relationship and seek ways to minimize the sense of loss and separation. Recent research shows behavioral patterns that parents describe as allowing them to connect emotionally with the deceased child. These patterns can include praying for the child or simply sharing stories about the child with a friend (see sidebars). Such strategies for maintaining connections make it possible for many bereaved parents to preserve an emotional tie to their deceased child and allow them to process the change in that relationship in a personalized way. Understanding these patterns can aid in developing therapeutic avenues of support for bereaved parents and suggest helpful ideas to concerned family members, friends, or professionals.

**Keeping Memories Alive**

Parents who have lost a child are often concerned about keeping the child’s memory alive for themselves, family members, and other people. This may involve preserving existing sources of memory related to the child or creating new sources of memory. Some parents will find comfort in possessing certain things that belonged to the child. For example, one mother treasured a bandanna her son had worn that his friend had given to her after the son’s death. Often parents will gather and keep certain of the child’s possessions. It can be meaningful to help facilitate such efforts for a bereaved parent.

It is quite common for parents who have lost a child to create a new source of memory as a lasting reminder of the child. Some of the specific examples include making scrapbooks or histories of the child or establishing a scholarship in the child’s name.

**Blessing Others**

Parents who lose children may feel a desire to reach out to others as a result of their own loss. This desire may reflect care given to others in place of what they would have given to the deceased child. Organizations like M.A.D.D. (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) or efforts like the Children’s Miracle Network (fundraising effort for children’s hospitals) had their genesis in the experience of parental bereavement. Informal support efforts (individual contacts, etc.) are considered to be most helpful for bereaved parents, and those who receive such assistance are less likely to seek formal sources of support. Yet formal support groups have been found to be helpful for some bereaved parents and can aid in the long healing process. One mother became involved in teaching motorcycle safety courses after her own young adult son had died in a motorcycle accident: she found this to be mean-
ingful and important volunteer work. Parents who describe extending care to others in place of their deceased child speak of reaching out to friends of the child, new children or grandchildren, and others outside the family circle. Some scholars have suggested that bereaved parents who involve themselves in such altruistic efforts seem to find greater meaning and cope better than those who do not.

Parental Bereavement and Family Relationships

The death of a child can have a variety of effects on family relationships, often creating strain and reducing the capacity of bereaved parents to manage their relationships effectively. The family system is changed when a child dies. For example, the death of an oldest child leaves a space that other children may try to fill.

The demands placed upon a marital relationship following a child’s death add another heavy burden to the load of pain. Couples must often adjust their expectations of one another, since no two persons grieve in exactly the same manner. Each spouse struggles with emotional and physical fatigue while trying to meet the continuing demands of life. Usually sexual intimacy ceases for some time following a child’s death, and individuals vary widely in their readiness to resume this aspect of marital life.

While these difficulties tend to be magnified during the first several months of mourning after a child’s loss, over time, patterns of marital interaction resume with various adjustments, and many couples report feeling better about their marriage than ever before because they have passed through the ultimate trial together and drawn closer.

Parenting Other Children

Bereaved parents are often placed in a challenging position because, as Therese Rando has noted, “Parents who have other children must continue to function in the very role that they are trying to grieve for and relinquish, that is, the parental role.” During the weeks and months immediately following a child’s death, parents may benefit from assistance with caring for their surviving children. A parent’s energies are diminished, making parental responsibilities much more difficult to perform.

Parents must help their remaining children cope emotionally and understand the loss of a sibling. Many parents thus find their parenting needs intensified at the same time their capacities are challenged. That pattern can be stressful because parents fear other children may resent the inadequacy of attention or care, particularly in cases where the death follows a lengthy illness or injury. The conflict a parent feels between having lost the parental role to one child while continuing it with others can add to the difficulty of the grief process. Families who have lost a child may benefit from help directing attention to these needs and focusing on how they and the other children in the family might be sensitive to each other.

Although parental capacity may be affected for a time after a child’s death, a parent’s desire to better his or her future interactions with surviving children often intensifies. One expected consequence of los-
ing a child is a tendency for parents to become protective of surviving children. One father even told of stopping strangers on the side of the road to lecture them about bicycle safety after losing his own son. Many bereaved parents also make efforts to strengthen relationships with surviving children through giving more of themselves to the children, making a greater commitment to spend time with other children, and being involved enough to feel that they can make a difference in the child’s life and happiness. While such efforts are understandable, bereaved parents must be careful not to become overly intrusive. Despite the challenges, parents often strive to improve their parenting and focus on teaching their values and beliefs, giving greater love and affection to children, and being responsive to the needs of their children.

**Conclusion**

The death of a child wholly disrupts ordinary family life. A child’s death prompts difficult questions and launches parents on an unwelcome journey of pain and transformation. The path of bereavement includes challenge to one’s sense of self and changes forever a parent’s relationship with the deceased child and other family members. Yet as parents move into the future, they teach us that by finding ways to connect with the child they have lost and with others around them, there is a way through the tragedy of child loss. They remind us that to believe is to remember.

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**References**


8. Therese A. Rando, note 3, above.


10. J. R. Bernstein, note 9, above.

11. Id.


13. J. R. Bernstein, note 9, above.

14. Theres A. Rando, note 3, above, p. 22.