

*Supporting parents after the death of their child*

# Guidelines for employers of bereaved parents



*Supporting parents after bereavement*

  
**AnamCara**.ie

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## About these guidelines

The death of a child is devastating. If one of your employees loses a child, your support as an employer can help them to get through it.

The routine of a work environment can be a great help to them in carrying on with their lives and coping with their loss.

This leaflet provides you with guidelines on what to do if you hear of the death of an employee's child and what to do before and after they return to work.

The guidelines have been developed based on the feedback of bereaved working parents as part of an Anam Cara survey. They also draw on international examples of good practice.

## When you hear of the death

Using the guidelines below will help to make the bereaved employee's return to work a bit easier. It will help lessen

the feeling of isolation from others that many recently bereaved parents feel.

## Tell those who need to know

Ensure that relevant employees are told of the death straight away. This will give them the chance to acknowledge the bereavement, for example, by visiting or sending messages of sympathy, if they wish. It also saves the bereaved parent the experience of meeting colleagues who don't know what has happened.

## Show support

The bereaved parents appreciate when you and their colleagues acknowledge and offer sympathy. So, if possible:

- attend the funeral and/or offer time for some colleagues of the bereaved parent to attend. If you cannot attend, send a message of sympathy and support
- offer the bereaved parent as much time off as possible

- give them contact details of your Employee Assistance Programme (if you have one) as parents may be able to get counselling
- Try and come to an agreement with the parent on the level and type of contact that they wish to have with you and their colleagues

### When can I expect my employee to return to work?

Bereaved parents will feel ready to come back to work at different times. Some cannot face work for a long time, others want to get back into the routine as soon as possible.

For most people, going back to work when they are ready can be helpful. It provides a structure and sometimes a distraction from their grief. If employers and colleagues are sympathetic and supportive, work may even be a comforting environment.

### What do I do before the employee returns to work?

You, the HR Manager or the employee's own manager should meet with the bereaved parent before they return or immediately after they return to work.

During this meeting it is important for you to acknowledge their loss and to offer

your sympathy. Don't ignore the subject and act as if nothing has happened.

### I find talking about death difficult. What should I say or do?

You may feel awkward around a bereaved employee, but don't let this stop you acknowledging their loss. A simple 'I am so sorry' or, if appropriate, a hug may be the right thing to do.

Some employees may want to talk about their child and their loss; others prefer not to. If they want to talk, be willing to listen. Understand that the initial return to work will be difficult for the employee on different levels.

### What can I do to help my employee when they are back at work?

*"My life has changed utterly since I last worked with you. Inside I feel totally shattered in every way by this event."*

If possible, offer the employee flexibility in terms of working hours and workload.

Let them know that you and work colleagues are there to support them through this very difficult time.

## How much work should I give the employee when they return to work?

That's a hard question to answer. The Anam Cara survey found that, in general, parents prefer to be busy when they come back to work. However, others will feel unable to take on challenges and will want to significantly reduce their workload. Different arrangements will suit different people, so talk with the bereaved person to agree arrangements. Don't assume anything.

## I made special arrangements for my employee. How long do I have to keep these in place?

It depends. You should agree a time to talk to the employee about how well the arrangements are working for them and for you. Do this every few weeks.

Remember that it is very difficult for a bereaved parent to function fully when they return to work. They may be having trouble sleeping. They may be depressed, anxious, preoccupied and have difficulty concentrating, all of which may affect performance at work.

## I am worried about my employee's health and/or safety. What do I do?

If you have health and safety concerns relevant to the bereaved parent's work, talk

to the employee about your concerns to see if you can address them in a way that works for both of you.

If in doubt, the employee should consult with the company's or their own GP. You may need to change their duties for a time.

## What do I say or do as time goes on?

*"I have bad days as well as good. That doesn't mean I'm not coping."*

**Do not assume** that once the bereaved parent is settled back at work they are 'over it' and that you don't have to make any further reference to their loss. Bereaved parents can learn to live with their loss but it will always be there.

People differ in how and for how long they grieve; it generally takes longer than we may think. For some, the full impact of their loss may be delayed. So ask every now and then, at least in the first few years, how the person is doing.

Though it might be hard for you, you can give support to the grieving parent. This will help your employee return to high performance and improve the overall morale and commitment in your workplace. The bereaved parent will appreciate your support.

# Supporting parents after bereavement

## Unhelpful comments

- ✗ 'Everything happens for a reason.'
- ✗ 'You have an angel in heaven now.'
- ✗ 'Snap out of it!'
- ✗ 'Have a nice weekend.'
- ✗ 'You can have more children.' or 'At least you have other children.' No child can ever replace the one who has been lost.
- ✗ 'Time is a great healer.'
- ✗ 'My granny died last year – I know how you feel.'
- ✗ 'It's time to get back to normal.'

## What bereaved parents find helpful

Acknowledgment of their loss. Try to remember their child's birthday, anniversary, Mother's and Father's Day.

*"The worst thing is if people say nothing about my child's death, as if nothing has happened."*

Flexibility.

*"It's great to be able to discuss the possibility of flexible hours, days, tasks."*

To have a say, not to be treated with 'kid gloves' and to continue to be included in work and social occasions.

*"Don't isolate me by deciding whether I am 'able' for something. Let me be involved in that decision."*

Each loss is different, each person is different.

*"There is no cure or quick fix for my loss. I have to deal with it as best I can..."*

Anam Cara is an all-Ireland organisation providing online and face-to-face peer support services to bereaved parents. The death of a child of any age and through any circumstances is devastating.

Anam Cara is an inclusive organisation. All our services are provided free of charge regardless of the age of the child or circumstances of their death.

We hope these guidelines have been helpful. If you wish further assistance in supporting your employee or colleague, don't hesitate to contact us. You may also wish to direct your employee to Anam Cara's Information Videos, which can be viewed on our website. These involve interviews with bereaved parents on themes such as "A Dad's Grief" and "The Grieving Family".

Also available to parents is our Bereavement Information Pack. This includes seven booklets written by bereaved parents for bereaved parents, on "A Mother's Grief", "Coping with Sudden Death" and other themes.

Anam Cara appreciates the contribution of our parents to this employers resource.



## **Anam Cara Parental and Sibling Bereavement Support**

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