

The death of a child is one of the most stressful and enduring events a person can experience, shadowing parents, caregivers, and families for years, if not a lifetime. While every loss is profound, some causes of death—such as overdose, homicide, stillbirth, or suicide—carry additional layers of complexity, trauma, or social stigma that shape how grief is experienced and expressed. This fact sheet provides a brief overview of the unique emotional, social, and systemic challenges that families may face after the death of a child.



Unexpected and Expected Deaths

The cause and manner of death can play a role in how a parent, caregiver, or family grieves based on the different systems with which the family will be forced to interact. For example, when a child dies by homicide, the criminal justice system will play a significant role. Families lose control of many things in the aftermath of their child's homicide, including prosecutorial and sentencing decisions, as well as how the media portrays the legacy and story of their child. When a child dies of terminal illness, the family will be forced to interact with the healthcare system and health insurance industry and may face the additional burden of significant medical debt.

Unexpected Death

When a child dies unexpectedly, families are left without the ability to emotionally prepare, cherish every minute, or say goodbye. This can intensify the emotional hardships in the aftermath, including indifferent or hurtful responses by first responders, death scene investigators, or the legal system. Examples of unexpected death include accidental drug or alcohol overdose, homicide, stillbirth, sudden unexpected infant death, suicide, traffic fatalities, or when no cause of death can be determined (also known as an undetermined death).

Expected Death

When a child is given a terminal diagnosis, families begin to grieve long before death occurs. This grief, known as anticipatory grief, can last weeks, months, or years, depending on the child's health status and prognosis. As the child ages, new hardships may emerge as family members watch their child die slowly. This can become emotionally overwhelming as there is nothing that medicine or science—and thus the family—can do to stop the child's decline.

Compounding the experience is the unpredictability of pediatric illnesses, which makes projecting a child's health status, care, and longevity notoriously difficult. Parents, caregivers, and families may experience a spectrum of emotions ranging from hope and happiness to devastation and despair; all within hours, days, or years.

Types of Grief

All types of grief bring yearning, emotional pain, and a gradual adaptation to the death. Some types of grief carry additional challenges based on how the child died or the stigma associated with the death.



Anticipatory Grief

Anticipatory grief occurs when a death is expected, allowing parents, caregivers, and families to “anticipate” or plan for the death. This form of grief is most commonly associated with a terminal illness diagnosis. However, it can also be applied to lifestyles that have a higher than average likelihood of death associated with them, including addiction or gang membership. Families may emotionally distance or detach as a way to cope and protect themselves from the current and future grief.



Disenfranchised Grief

Disenfranchised grief, also known as the grief that has no voice, is when a death or ensuing grief is not socially sanctioned or recognized, often leaving those grieving the loss without the social support or connection often afforded most other types of grief. Suicide, stillbirth, and addiction are commonly associated with disenfranchised grief.



Traumatic Grief

Traumatic grief often results from a death that is sudden, violent, or unexpected. Because the death of a child is out of the natural order of life (meaning, the child dies before their older relatives or caregivers), it is often considered traumatic. Intrusive thoughts, images, flashbacks, and avoidance of loss reminders are just some of the common symptoms bereaved parents, caregivers, and families may experience in the aftermath.

Special Considerations in the Aftermath of Child Death

While different causes and manners of death elicit various types of grief responses, the systems surrounding bereaved parents, caregivers, and families are similar; thus, there is a symmetry in the aftermath.

1. Accidental Drug or Alcohol Overdose Deaths

Despite the prevalence of addiction in the United States, drug and alcohol related deaths often lead to social isolation and stigma. These types of deaths often follow years of suffering on the part of the addicted individual and their family. In addition to the common emotions of grief discussed above, families may also experience a sense of relief that their child is no longer in pain.

2. Homicide

Homicide often thrusts families into the criminal justice system, where their rights or desires are neither considered nor honored. Whether it's during the investigative or court processes or with the parole or probation systems, families are often forced to relive and retell their story for years or decades to seek justice for their child's death.

3. Stillbirth

Stillbirth carries unique hardship as parents are on the cusp of welcoming a new child into their lives and, often, unexpectedly and without explanation, the child dies, leaving the family heartbroken, confused, and in a state of disbelief. Complicating the loss, hospital systems tend to co-locate the grieving mother in maternity wards, where other crying newborn children can be overheard, thus compounding the loss.

4. Sudden unexpected infant death

Sudden unexpected infant deaths (SUID) are often the result of accidental suffocation or strangulation during sleep or unknown causes. Newly bereaved parents, caregivers, or families may be asked to reenact the death with a fabric doll only hours following their child's death, often while death scene investigators take photos and Child Protective Services is dispatched to determine the care and safety of remaining children. These responses often bring additional suffering to families, further complicating their ability to cope and adapt in the aftermath.

5. Suicide

Death by suicide often carries subtle or overt social stigmas and shame; as such, families may feel unable to share their child's story for fear of judgment. For example, the phrase "committed suicide" creates an association with a willful crime or sin against God, rather than acknowledging the child experienced a complex mental health crisis. The fear of judgment and shame often leaves individuals and families grieving a death by suicide profoundly isolated.

About Evermore

Evermore is making the world a more livable place for all bereaved people by raising awareness, advancing bereavement science, and advocating for policy change. Visit evermore.org to learn more.