

New York Life/NAGC Survey: Bereaved Parents Face Big Challenges in Helping Kids Cope with Loss

Survey of Surviving Parents Finds:

- Three-quarters of parents say not enough resources to help grieving kids
- 43% worry daily about how their children are coping
- Nearly 6 of 10 say “hard to know what my child needs from me”

For the Bereaved, Household/Financial Management Becomes Daunting:

- Three-quarters need help with household maintenance
- Half “not prepared” for financial impact of loss
- Six of 10 find it harder to maintain lifestyle, invest, save for kids’ higher education

Friends/Community Can Make All the Difference:

- A key “grief resource”: Societal understanding/support
- Yet, many parents say friends, co-workers reluctant to discuss loss
- Three-quarters of parents say support of friends/family has “major impact” on ability of grieving kids to cope

New York Life Foundation Offers AChildInGrief.com, To Help Guide Parents, Kids Through Loss

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NEW YORK--([BUSINESS WIRE](#))--Parents who have had a spouse or partner die find it challenging to know how best to support their grieving children, a challenge complicated by a lack of community awareness about bereavement as well as resources that respond to the needs of those in grief, according to the results of a nationwide survey of bereaved spouses/partners released here today by the New York Life Foundation and the National Alliance for Grieving Children (NAGC).

Grief’s impact is both lasting and profound, the survey indicates. Nine of 10 parents say the death of their spouse/partner is “the worst thing that has ever happened” to them. Nearly eight of 10 say they think about their deceased spouse/partner every day and 70% indicate they would “give up a year of my life for one more day with my departed spouse.”

At the same time that they are striving to cope with their own grief, bereaved spouses/partners also are beset by worry about their children, with nearly half reporting their kids are having more trouble in school and nearly six of 10 indicating “I find it hard to know what my child needs from me.”

The poll of 548 parents who lost a spouse/partner and who still had children under the age of 19 living at home was conducted nationwide via the Internet between July 6 and October 5, 2011, by the national polling firm Mathew Greenwald & Associates, Inc. The research was conducted under the auspices of the National Alliance for Grieving Children, the nation’s leading organization of bereavement centers, and was underwritten by a grant from the New York Life Foundation.

“Bereavement is a universal experience – a burden that inevitably each of us will shoulder at some point in our lives,” said Chris Park, president of the New York Life Foundation. “The irony is that as a society and as individuals, all too often we shy away from confronting the grief phenomenon, and therefore neglect the urgent need to help those struggling with loss – in particular, children who have suffered the devastating loss of a parent.”

Death of Parent in Childhood a Widespread Phenomenon

More families may be struggling with loss than may be commonly thought. In late 2009, a survey of 1,006 adults conducted by New York Life with Comfort Zone Camp, a leading provider of bereavement support services for children, found that one of nine Americans had lost a parent before age 20; one in seven had lost a parent or sibling before turning 20.

“We believe that it is time to shine a brighter light on grief, to better understand its impact on both kids and parents, and to resolve to do more to help families along their grief journey,” Park said.

“We’re grateful for the tremendous support that New York Life is providing for this urgent cause,” said Andy McNiel, executive director of the National Alliance for Grieving Children. “Our polling has confirmed what many professionals providing grief support to families understood to be true about grief and has generated new insights into how bereaved parents strive to ease the grief of their kids – and what we can all do, individually and collectively, to make a difference in our communities, workplaces and families for those grieving the death of a family member.”

For Parents, Concern for Kids Intensifies Grief’s Burden

For bereaved spouses/partners, bereavement’s burden is exacerbated by unrelenting worry regarding how their kids are dealing with life following their loss, the survey indicates.

Nearly half say they worry daily about how their children are coping with the death of their parent. Many parents concede that they don’t truly understand what their children are going through in managing their grief: More than three-quarters of parents say it’s “hard to know what is ‘normal’ kid behavior vs. what is grief related.”

“Though grief is a shared phenomenon, children don’t necessarily grieve in the same way as their parents do, and parents clearly feel challenged to understand precisely how loss is affecting their children,” said David J. Schonfeld, MD, Director of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center.

At the same time, parents are concerned about the worry that their kids are themselves experiencing. About two-thirds say their kids worry at least sometimes about their surviving parent going through life alone, and nearly four in 10 think their child worries frequently about them getting sick or dying. “When a death directly affects children, death’s reality cannot be hidden from them,” said Dr. Schonfeld. “Sometimes children are overwhelmed with worry that others close to them—perhaps everyone they care about—will also die.

“The findings speak to the critical need to better understand the nature of grief experienced by children – and should compel us to work harder to meet each child’s specific needs as best we can,” he said.

Schools Often Not Prepared to Help

How their kids are faring in school is a particular source of worry for many parents. About a third say their kids don’t do as well in school as they did before and are getting in more trouble than they used to.

Indeed, about four in 10 parents say their children's school was not well prepared to help their children deal with their loss.

“Children in grief are entrusted for hours daily to the oversight and responsibility of professionals who, very likely, have never received any specific training about how to help children who are grieving and don't know what they can do to help them cope more effectively,” said Dr. Schonfeld. “With school officials literally on the ‘front lines’ of the grief phenomenon outside the home, we need to ensure that schools and teachers, in particular, are better prepared to support grieving students.”

Families, Friends Reluctant to Discuss Death

Within families, dealing with the grief burden is complicated by the evident difficulty that many parents have in discussing their shared feelings about the death with their kids.

More than half (54%) of parents say they talk with their children about the death of their parent only occasionally, and the same number say “I wish I could talk more with my child about our loss.” More than half of parents say they at least occasionally avoid talking to their child about their feelings of grief because they think it might upset them.

“Open and caring conversation and connection among family members about their shared grief can be an important part of the healing process, but even within the closest of families the grief conversation can be a difficult one,” McNiel said. “Within families – as across society at large – we are rarely comfortable expressing our feelings about the death of someone in our life.”

As difficult as the grief conversation is within families, the survey also strongly indicates that for many families the healing process is made even more challenging by the obvious reluctance of those outside the family – including friends and co-workers – to discuss what has happened to them.

More than half – 56% -- of parents agreed that “most adults don't know how to talk to me or my kids when we run into them.” Nearly six of 10 parents say that, after their loss, friends stopped talking with them and 70% agreed that some of their friends or co-workers seemed uncomfortable around them. At the same time, nearly 90% said they wished people understood that “it's better to say something and risk upsetting me than to ignore my loss altogether.”

In Their Communities, Bereaved Have Feelings of “Difference”

Reticence about discussing or acknowledging death and grief seems to engender in the bereaved feelings of “difference” from those in the community, as if they are undergoing a unique experience to which no one else can relate.

In fact, 63% of bereaved parents strongly agree that after their spouse/partner died, they felt like they were “different” from other adults in the community.

“For the bereaved, this feeling of ‘difference’ – sustained inadvertently by the discomfort of others – is one of the most intractable problems of the grief experience,” said Alesia Alexander Layne, founder and executive director of Project KHARMA, Inc., a grief support program for children and teenagers in

Atlanta. “For bereaved kids, it is especially painful – since kids live in constant fear of somehow being tagged as ‘different’ from other kids.

“Creating opportunities for the bereaved, kids first and foremost, to simply connect with peers who are going through the very same thing does wonders in banishing these feelings of ‘difference’ – and is one of the most valuable ways to support bereaved families,” said Layne.

Families Challenged to Maintain Financial Security

The death of a spouse/partner creates burdens on many levels, and at the same time that bereaved spouses/partners are struggling to manage the emotional burdens of the death, many are also having difficulty dealing with many of the formerly straightforward details of domestic life.

Three-quarters say they have needed help with household maintenance. A little more than half (54%) report needing assistance with financial management.

Financial management, in fact, is one of the more complex issues associated with loss of a parent. Half of parents say they were not prepared for the financial impact of their spouse’s death. Two-thirds say it has been harder to put money away, and about six in 10 say it has been harder to invest, save for their child’s college education, and earn enough money to maintain their lifestyle. Nearly six of 10 agree that it has been harder to “find some money to spend on yourself.”

“For bereaved parents and kids, money issues can generate a cascade of worries,” said Meredith Moore, a New York Life agent from Roswell, Ga. “Kids, for example, might worry about their surviving parent’s ability to keep the family together in their home, or the possibility of having to move and attend a new, unfamiliar school.”

“Perhaps no one can ever fully prepare for the impact of loss, but there is much that parents can do to create safeguards against the financial disruption that often follows when the unthinkable occurs,” said Larry Bennett, a New York Life agent based in Brea, Calif. “Professional financial guidance can be invaluable in putting these safeguards in place.”

What’s Needed? Society’s Understanding and Support

Bereaved spouses/partners and their children need support across a broad range of areas, the poll suggests. More than three-quarters of parents agree that there are not enough resources to help kids who have had a parent die; just as many agree that there are not enough resources to help parents who have lost a spouse or partner.

When asked, however, which grief resources they wish were available, for both their kids and themselves, parents cite “greater general societal understanding and support” most often of the options offered. Parents also believe that such support is the most valuable grief resource for both themselves and their kids.

Friends and family have an indispensable role to play as well. More than eight of 10 parents agree that “it really helps to talk to my friends” about their loss.

Three-quarters agree that the amount of support bereaved kids receive from friends and family has a major impact on how a child copes with loss.

“Society’s understanding and support are key, but we also need to translate this understanding into tangible, practical assistance for bereaved families, children in particular, across their entire spectrum of need,” said Chris Blunt, New York Life executive vice president. “As bereaved families work through their loss, what they really need is to feel connected to caring communities of friends, co-workers and professionals who acknowledge their bereavement without hesitation or discomfort, offer an occasional helping hand, and encourage those experiencing grief to share their feelings about this all too common experience.”

Indeed, eight of 10 parents agree that “people don’t have to give me special treatment; I just want to be treated normally.”

“At the same time, there is much we all need to learn about the grief experience, as well as a great deal more that schools, workplaces, faith communities and other institutions can do to help directly sustain those who have suffered loss,” said Blunt.

AChildInGrief.com Offers Information, Guidance, Support

The New York Life Foundation has long been focused on serving children in need. In 2008, the Foundation expanded that focus to include an initiative to help children deal with the loss of a parent, caregiver or sibling and to help parents and other caring adults help children deal with the emotional turmoil that results from the death of a close family member.

As part of its commitment, the Foundation has created a Website, www.AChildInGrief.com, which offers a broad range of informational and educational resources for parents, kids, educators and the public regarding loss. Those resources include a downloadable brochure, “After a Loved One Dies – How Children Grieve,” offering advice and guidance to parents and other caregivers as they help children cope with their grief and fear following a death in the family. For more information, please visit www.AChildInGrief.com

Support also is available at www.ChildrenGrieve.org offered by the National Alliance for Grieving Children, including guides for parents and educators, and an interactive map identifying family bereavement centers across the nation.

For full results of the New York Life/NAGC survey, please click [here](#); to view a video on the issue of childhood loss, please click [here](#).

On Children’s Grief Awareness Day, Thursday, November 17, Chris Park, who is president of the New York Life Foundation, will moderate a Twitter chat from 3:00-4:00 pm ET, offering tips and discussion around this important topic. Search Twitter for #NYLTips to join the conversation.

About The New York Life Foundation

Inspired by New York Life's tradition of service and humanity, the New York Life Foundation has, since its founding in 1979, provided more than \$140 million in charitable contributions to national and local nonprofit organizations. Through its focus on “Nurturing the Children,” the Foundation supports programs that benefit young people, particularly in the areas of childhood bereavement, educational enhancement opportunities and safe places to learn and grow. The Foundation also encourages and facilitates the community involvement of employees, agents, and retirees of New York Life through its Volunteers for Life program. To learn more, please visit www.newyorklifefoundation.org

About the National Alliance for Grieving Children

The National Alliance for Grieving Children (NAGC) promotes awareness of the needs of children and teens grieving a death and provides education and resources for anyone who wants to support them. NAGC provides a network for nationwide communication between hundreds of children's bereavement centers who want to share ideas, information and resources with each other to better support the families they serve in their own communities. To learn more, please visit www.nationalallianceforgrievingchildren.org

Mathew Greenwald & Associates is a premier full service market research firm headquartered in Washington, D.C.

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