



# Bereaved Parents of the USA

## **EMERGENCY PERSONNEL:**

### **HOW TO HELP THE FAMILY AFTER THE SUDDEN ILLNESS, INJURY OR DEATH OF A CHILD**

Emergency rescue personnel face a most difficult task: telling parents about a serious injury or sudden death of their child. You should know that what you say and how you say it will be remembered by the parents forever. You will leave and go on to other matters but they will live with the moments of the sickness, injury or death of their child for the rest of their lives. Perhaps the best way to decide what to say and how to say it is to imagine how you would like to be treated in the same situation.

Here are some suggestions that may help you to meet the needs of the surviving family members while still conducting your professional duties.

#### **A Sudden Illness or Accident**

- Even though your first responsibility is to stabilize and transport the child, have someone of your group take time to talk with the parents and try to answer their questions honestly and with compassion.
- Ask whether you can call someone to help them—family, friend or minister.
- Refer to the child by name and, if possible, let the parents see the child. Prepare them but realize that no matter how bad a child may look at an accident scene, the parent(s) see only their loved one and, if prepared, are a help to their child and are helped themselves by seeing the child.
- Remember that the child, even if unconscious, may hear what you are saying and the parents can hear your conversations with one another, your base or dispatcher, and the hospital. If you think that what you will have to say will be too upsetting, go to an area where the parents will not hear you.
- Allow the parent to ride to the hospital with you, if it is not a situation where the parent would be hindering your work. If you cannot allow the parent to go with you to the hospital, arrange for someone to see that they get there safely and assure them that their child will have the best care.
- If you can stay with the parents at the hospital until family or friends come, do so. If not, be sure that hospital personnel know where they are.

- Give the parents information on how they can contact you later if they need to talk or ask questions.
- Speak to the family members in person; do not make your first contact by telephone or voice-mail message.
- Do not give the news media information about the child before speaking to—and getting permission from—the family.

## **Breaking the News**

- Two uniformed (if possible) personnel should break the news, referring to the child by name.
- Speak only to members of the immediate family.
- Use clear, non-technical language to tell them that an emergency situation has occurred and has resulted in the death of their child.
- Without harming any subsequent investigation, give as much information as you can—honestly and respectfully.
- Avoid leaving the family alone. Ask if you can contact someone to be with them—family, friend or minister.
- If someone from the family must make a positive identification of a child, arrange to get that person to and from the location of the body.
- If family members want to see the child, tell them what to expect.

## **A Death at Home**

- Stay at the scene until authorities arrive.
- Be prepared to respond to the family members' displays of grief, i.e., anger, denial and hysteria.
- At all times, treat the family and the child with dignity.
- Answer all questions tactfully and honestly.
- Again, avoid leaving the family alone. Offer to contact a neighbor, friend, family or clergyman.

## **A Death at the Hospital**

Often, when a child is taken to the hospital, the family is placed in a room for what seems to them an eternity. They appreciate and need any information—even the confirmation of death. If you need to get back on duty and can't stay with the family to give support and answer questions, find someone who can. Leave your name and phone number, if possible, so the family can call you later for answers to any questions they may have after they leave the hospital.

## **Further Assistance**

The family will appreciate your caring, direct and honest manner at this time, and your concern about their well-being will mean a great deal to them in the days and months to come. Become familiar with self-help organizations that serve bereaved families and suggest to the family that they contact such an organization in their community. (The hospital should have a list of resources.) You can also find a listing of support groups and other help at our website: [bereavedparentsusa.org](http://bereavedparentsusa.org).

*The following brochures are also available:*

- The Bereaved Parents of the USA
- In The Beginning
- Sudden Death
- Prolonged Illness
- For Bereaved Grandparents
- When a Child Dies: What Medical Personnel Can Do

*The Bereaved Parents of the USA is a non-profit, self-help organization that offers friendship, support and understanding to bereaved parents and their families. Individuals differ, but we are all alike in seeking ways to overcome grief. Grieving people can adjust and life eventually can have meaning again. Other helpful brochures are available on other aspects of grieving. For information, contact BP/USA at P. O. Box 95, Park Forest, IL 60466, 708-748-7866 or on the web at [bereavedparentsusa.org](http://bereavedparentsusa.org).*

©2001 BP/USA