

A GRANDPARENT'S HOLIDAY DILEMMA

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A difficult part of being a bereaved grandparent at the holiday time is that we are expected to be all things to all our children. To those who have healthy and complete families we are expected to share in their joy. To our bereaved child we are expected to understand, empathize and, above all, be aware of the special difficulty the holidays bring for them. We are put in the middle between our children, happy families on one side, and a sad one on the other. In addition, we have our own pain to deal with.

It seems to me that this is an impossible situation and frequently we are expected to do the impossible, but I don't think we can, nor do I think we should try. Because I am a bereaved parent myself and I have experienced that special grief, I know my bereaved daughter's second Christmas without her Emily will be a hard one, maybe even harder than the first one. It will be especially hard for her because this year my oldest son and his (complete) family will come from Minneapolis to St. Louis for Christmas. He has three little ones; the oldest is the same age that Emily would be. Seeing Bob's children, especially Robbie, will remind Dorothy even more that Emily will not be physically a part of our holidays.

For weeks I have been tormented with thoughts on how I will handle this situation. Will I act at the holidays in a way that will make my son happy, or in ways that will be supportive of my daughter? Granted, there will be separate times when I can be happy that my son and his family are here and happy to see my grandchildren, whom I don't see often; and there will be a time when I can be totally supportive of my bereaved daughter. But this will not be possible for all the time, especially on Christmas Day.

I have decided that, as hard as it may be to do, I must make a choice between them this year, and I choose to be supportive of my bereaved daughter. This may sound unfair, but is it? When our children were younger, weren't there times, such as when one was sick and needed our special attention, didn't we give it to them, oft times to the neglect of the others? This didn't mean we loved the sick child more than the others. It simply meant that the sick one needed us more than the others at that time. Our bereaved child is experiencing the most pain he/she will ever experience in his/her life and right now, needs us more.

Unfortunately, our child with the complete family may resent our attention to the bereaved child and feel neglected maybe even hurt, and for that we are sorry, but our child who has not lost a child has not experienced the constant pain and hurt our bereaved child has for a year or longer. We cannot let ourselves be too concerned that he/she may feel neglected or hurt for a few days.

To benefit ourselves as well as our bereaved child, we may consider changing some of our holiday traditions this year. Have a buffet instead of a sit-down dinner. Put the tree in the living room instead of the family room this year. A number of changes are possible. As in my case, my bereaved child lost her only child. I have asked her to come later, after my son's three little ones have opened their presents, so that she won't have to see the joy in their eyes that she will never again see in Emily's.

Even as parents of grown and married children, we never stop being teachers to them. We can take this opportunity to teach our non-bereaved children empathy and concern for others. This too can be a special lesson for our surviving grandchildren that they can learn from us.

We can enlist our non-bereaved children's aid in helping the bereaved child get through the holiday with a little less pain. We can remind them that while it may be somewhat uncomfortable for them to acknowledge or talk about a child who is dead, how much more uncomfortable it is to the parent of a child who is dead. We may suggest some special ways to remember the dead child in our family celebration.

Each person may make some statement about how they miss that child or a certain thing they remember about him/her. Or, we might light a special candle on the dining room table or hand a special ornament. This serves two purposes. It is helpful to the bereaved child because it lets him/her know his/her child has not been forgotten and is still, in a special way, a part of the family. And, it helps the non-bereaved children because it clears the air of unspoken thoughts and feelings.