

How Many Children Do You Have?

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Shortly after my son died, I realized that this question was going to be bothersome. Each time someone asked me about the number of children, I struggled with the answer. I soon decided I was not going to let this become a problem. I thought about how I felt about my choices of answer and chose the one that met my needs in the beginning. I had a surviving daughter, but I knew for me to say "one" would seem a denial on my part that my son had lived, and that wasn't right for me.

In the beginning, when I still needed to tell people that my son had died, I would tell in detail about his accident when the question about how many children came my way. As the months passed and I had told the story enough times, I found that it wasn't necessary to go into detail any more. My needs had changed, and I rethought my answer.

Now, when I am asked how many children I have, I answer, "I had two children. The criteria I used in determining if I go any further is whether the person asking is going to be a continuing part of my life. If so, they need to know about my son, and I tell them. Otherwise, we will be constantly dancing around that fact. Better, I think, to have it out in the open. It then loses its ability to interfere with the relationship.

If, on the other hand, the person asking is simply passing through my life, then I feel no need to go any further than, "I had two children." Seldom does anyone catch the had instead of have, and pursue it. If they do, or if they ask follow up questions about ages or professions, I tell them first that my 26 year old son was killed in an accident. Then I tell them about my daughter who is alive and doing well. This gives them a choice. They can either acknowledge my son's death and ask questions, or they can ignore that and ask about my daughter. I am comfortable either way. If they are embarrassed, I see that as their problem. Just to show you how different we all are, however, my husband feels comfortable answering, "We have one child." That is what is right for him and is what he should say.

You decide what is right for you - then say it. That way you defuse that powerful question and it loses its ability to traumatize. Don't let it be a problem.

