Helen & Douglas House
your local children's hospice

Navigating the festive period

We are sorry that you are bereaved of your child, and that you are facing this festive period as a bereaved parent. In this document, we use the term "festive season" in 2025 to mean Hannukah, Christmas, New Year. The festive period can often previously have been a time that was very much looked forward to. When a child has died, that anticipation becomes clouded. You may watch as those around you prepare with excitement for their festive season, and grief may be intensified.

There are no definitive ideas on how best to handle this time of year. What follows are some suggestions, many drawn from the experience of bereaved families themselves.

Feelings:
Acknowledge the emotions – tears, sadness, and anxiety are very normal reactions, and you don't have to pretend that they don't exist. If you do laugh or something makes you smile, that is OK too.

If you have other children:
Ask them what they would like to do. They may want to continue family traditions e.g. game playing, or they may wish for new ones. They may value discussing any changes you are considering and have new suggestions themselves.

Amongst the pain, continuing bonds with your child and honouring their memory can integrate their presence into your life in a meaningful way. These bonds can be comforting and connect family members by creating their legacy which will forever be a part of your family's story. Open discussions allow each family member to feel heard. Encourage new ideas from your other children regarding new traditions.

For those families who do not have other children, the holidays may seem lonely and emotionally challenging. Older traditions that once involved your child may now feel harder to navigate. It might be an idea to create new traditions more personal to you in a way of honouring your child's memory.

Grandparents
Grandparents can experience a sense of overwhelm as they tend to a dual grief, being a sense of support for their own child while grieving the loss of a grandchild.

In a way of honouring your grandchild you may wish to create something as a memory to them, for example cooking their favourite dishes or creating some artwork that reminds you of your grandchild. What was their favourite colour? Was their personality smiley and sparkly? Art can be a great way for you to reflect this. There is no 'right' way to feel connected to your grandchild. Being creative could help to engage other family members as well as creating a personal keepsake for you to cherish. Sharing stories of your loved one, listening if other family members wish to share memories and metaphorically holding one another can be comforting for all who are grieving the loss. Parents and grandparents must be kind to themselves remembering the importance of self-care. Grief is as personal as the individual experiencing it.

Navigating the festive period cont.

Social support:
Consider accepting offers from good friends to spend time with you and ensure these are where you feel safe to cry, laugh and share memories.

Consider spending at least a short time, just as a family, to allow each person to remember or share something about how they feel.

Know your boundaries:
Think about what you can comfortably handle and let others know what that is. Rather than focusing on other people's expectations, do what feels right for you, even if it means letting go of past traditions or things you feel obliged to do.

Let others know whether you want to talk openly about your loved one or not.

If you normally host the celebrations, think about whether you want to continue to do so this year. Let others help. Think about having a simpler meal if you can't face cooking.

Changes:
Some people have found it can be helpful or make things less painful if you do things differently. These changes can be small or major, e.g. you may consider going away somewhere different, instead of staying at home or visiting relatives.

Some families have found it helpful to open presents at a different time or to eat at a different time.

Another possibility is to have friends or family take over some of the things that you or your child has normally done.

Buying Presents:
This may be easier if you have a list and do it on a "good day". Remember though that even good days can have their challenging moments. Consider shopping with a friend, or have friends do your shopping for you. Do it from the comfort of your own home, by phone, catalogue, or internet. Or maybe for this year, consider giving money or vouchers.

Cards:
Some families choose not to send any cards the first year. It's often hard for people to decide how to sign the cards and whether to include the person who has died or not. One option is to sign it and add "in memory of ..." or "remembering..." You may find it easier to take some time and decide how you want to sign the cards before you sit down to do it.

Some families advise their friends and family about how they want the child who has died remembered in the Christmas cards.

Remembering your loved one with a gift:
For some it just doesn't seem right, not to be buying a present for their loved one. You could consider:

- Giving a gift in memory of your loved one
- Donating the money, you might normally spend to a favourite charity.
- Buy a living tree or plant to put in your garden.
- Buy a new decoration for the Christmas tree.

Navigating the festive period cont.

Acknowledging and remembering your loved one during the festive period:

- You may think about adding a new tradition or ritual, e.g. Visit the cemetery or a special family place.
- Light a special candle in memory of your loved one.
- Choose a significant flower or plant to have in your home or take to the grave.
- Choose a special ornament or decoration for your tree or for your home.

Helpful questions to ask yourself:
When you are thinking about what to hold onto, and what you can let go of, these may be useful:

- Have I considered other close family members and told them what's important for me?
- Do I/other family members really enjoy doing this?
- Would this "festival" be this without it?

Taking care of yourself:
Grief is exhausting and when combined with this time of year can be particularly difficult. Exhaustion alters perception and can make things seem worse, so make sure you get enough rest and ask for support when you need it.

- You are not betraying your loved one if you manage to enjoy any of the celebrations.
- Engaging in activities such as going for a walk can be helpful for our wellbeing.
- Resting helps restore our fatigue.
- Deep breathing exercises help to reduce our stress and anxiety.

Further Support
The Helen & Douglas House Bereavement Support Service is open Monday to Friday, 9-5 pm (excluding weekends and bank holidays). Tel: 01865 794749. Or visit our website at www.helenanddouglas.org.uk/for-families/services/bereavement-support.

Out-of-hours support for parents/adults:

- **NHS Volunteer Responders** - 0808 196 3646. Open during the Christmas period 8.00 am to 8.00 pm. Website: nhscarevolunteerresponders.org
- **Samaritans** - 116 123. Website: www.samaritans.org
- **Shout** - Text 85258. Website: giveusashout.org
- **Mind** - 0300 123 3393 (not available over the Christmas break). Website: www.mind.org.uk
- **Cruse Bereavement Care** - 0808 808 1677. Website: www.cruse.org.uk
- **SANDS** – 0808 164 3332 (not available over Christmas period). Website: www.sands.org.uk
- **Compassionate Friends** - 0345 123 2304. The Compassionate Friends National Helpline is open during the Christmas period from 10 am – 4 pm, 7 pm- 10 pm every day. Website: www.tcf.org.uk
- **Child Death Helpline:** - 0800 282 986. Website: www.childdeathhelpline.org.uk
- **Child Bereavement UK Support** - 0800 02 888 40 (not available over the Christmas period). Website: www.childbereavementuk.org