

Parenting after the death of a child a difficult balancing act: study

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One of the tough challenges a parent faces when a child dies is to learn how to parent the surviving children, and the task begins immediately, according to York University psychology professor Stephen Fleming.

From the moment their child dies, [parents](#) are faced with the two extremes of loss and life – the suffocating loss of a child and the ongoing, daily demands from their surviving children, says Fleming, co-author of the recently-published book, *Parenting After the Death of a Child: A Practitioner's Guide*.

"The challenge that parents face is this: In the midst of grief, how do you stop parenting the deceased child while you are simultaneously struggling to meet the parenting needs of the children who remain?"

Fleming, a psychology professor in the Faculty of Health at York University, and co-author Jennifer Buckle, now a professor at Memorial University, did the research for the book when Buckle was a graduate student at York. Their research is based on in-depth interviews with parents who had lost a child and had one or more surviving children.

They found bereaved parents do not "recover" from the loss. Instead, bereaved parenting is an act of regeneration – picking up the pieces in the face of the devastation, and regenerating both a sense of self, and a sense of the family.

"Dads tend to be instrumental grievers. They go back to work, commit to

working for the family, and they tend to overcome the fear of putting their children out into an unsafe world, sooner than moms do," says Fleming. "Moms tend to be more intuitive grievors, more focused on internal feelings, and they have an almost paralyzing fear that if one child can die, another could die as well. So, often, moms are dragged back into parenting, by the surviving children."

Parenting After the Death of a Child fills a gap in the research about the impact of a child's death, because it focuses not only the grief experienced, but on the balancing act of grieving and parenting at the same time. A clinical psychologist, Fleming said he hopes the guide will educate counsellors about the importance of looking for psychological complications in mourning the loss of a child – for example, depression, generalized anxiety disorder, and posttraumatic stress disorder. Too often, parents are not assessed for these reactions, and they may be traumatized by images of their child's death, or illness, and reliving it, he says.

The qualitative research and excerpts from the parents who were interviewed are also intended to help bereaved parents deal with the expectations they put on themselves, and those imposed by the outside world. The research reassures parents, for example, that it is healthy to honour the role of the deceased child in the family by continuing to talk about the child with the surviving siblings. It may also offer comfort by busting myths – for example, the myth that losing a child increases the likelihood that parents will divorce, and that surviving family members will be split up. Roles change, and parents often struggle to be consistently present physically and emotionally for their children, Fleming says, but bereaved [parents](#) rebuild their lives because their children need it.

Provided by New York University

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