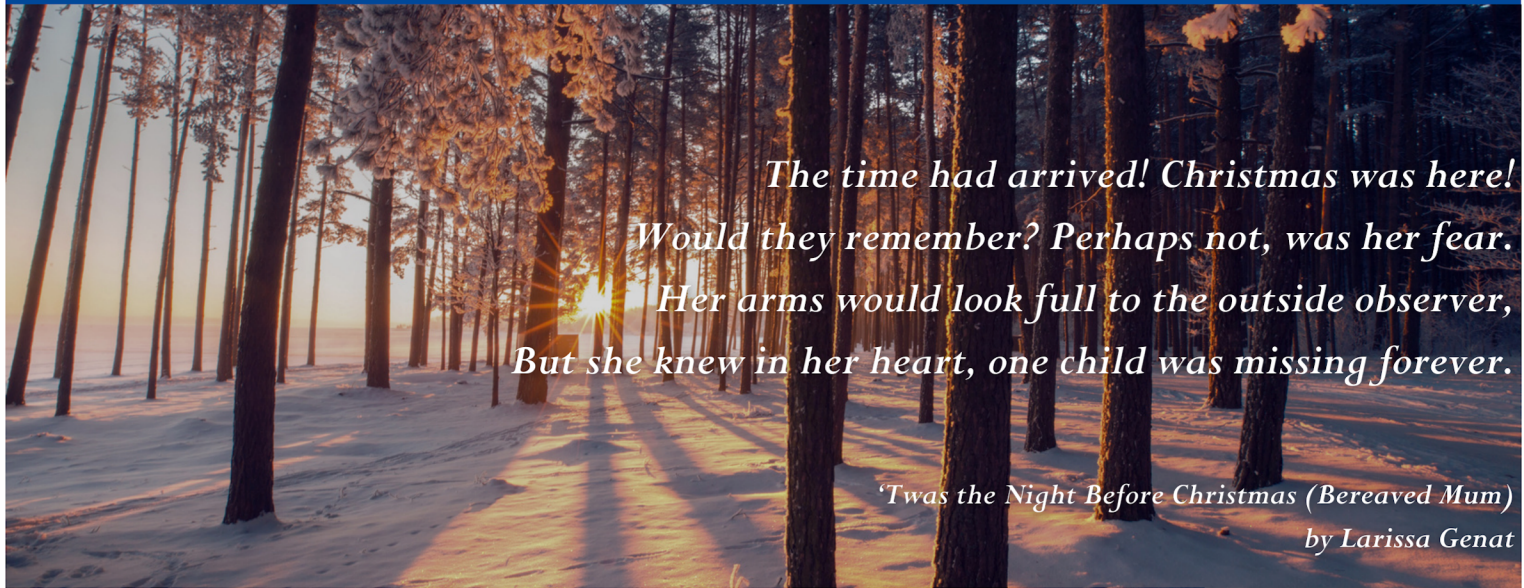


FIRSTLIGHT NEWSLETTER



*The time had arrived! Christmas was here!
Would they remember? Perhaps not, was her fear.
Her arms would look full to the outside observer,
But she knew in her heart, one child was missing forever.*

*'Twas the Night Before Christmas (Bereaved Mum)
by Larissa Genat*

MESSAGE FROM FIRSTLIGHT CEO

Dear Friends, Families and Supporters of FirstLight

As we move towards the end of the year and Christmas time, a season so associated with celebration and children, we hold in our thoughts all of those who are living with bereavement and for whom this may be a difficult time. The season can be challenging and it's important to be kind to yourself and to be accepting of perhaps not feeling the same excitement as others may be expressing. Please remember to ask for the support you might need from friends and family, and know that FirstLight and other organisations are here if you need additional or specialised support.

We are including in this edition some suggestions that we hope will help grieving parents and their family and friends through this time; a guide to coping with Christmas when your child has died and ways you can help grieving children. We are also sharing personal stories and poems from bereaved parents which we hope will resonate with you and provide you with some support.

As we come towards the end of 2023, we want to thank everyone who has supported FirstLight to provide its excellent crisis intervention and professional bereavement supports to families across the country. Already this year FirstLight has delivered over 1,500 hours of free professional counselling to 236 suddenly bereaved parents and family members across Ireland. We have also received 176 new referrals making this another year of increased demand and services delivery.

Our work would not have been possible without the dedication of FirstLight's staff team; the professionalism and support provided by FirstLight's compassionate counsellors and psychotherapists and the guidance of FirstLight's Council. We particularly thank Fionnuala Sheehan, FirstLight's first CEO who retired earlier this year and who was so instrumental in FirstLight's development and growth.

We are very grateful for the partnerships we have with our funders, and for the exceptional generosity, creativity and sheer energy of our donors and fundraisers. Without this support we could not provide the supports and services we do, and on behalf of all the families we work with, a very sincere thanks. We offer a special thanks to Gerard Heneghan, our newest FirstLight Ambassador who has been fundraising, representing the organisation, and advocating for our work in the west of Ireland.

We hope you all have a peaceful and happy holiday season. *May the songs of the season rise to greet you. May the winter wind be always at your back and may the frost shimmer soft upon your fields.*

Jennifer McCarthy Flynn

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FirstLight

Supporting Suddenly Bereaved Parents & Families

Do you sometimes wish that Christmas would go away, or that you could hibernate until it's all over? Christmas can be a tough time of year due to the family, social, and financial pressures that come with it. But these difficulties feign in comparison to the grief experienced by families who will never again spend Christmas with their beloved child.

When a child has died, the thought of celebrations and family times can be very daunting, and you may find yourself feeling robbed of the ability to find enjoyment in such occasions, particularly at Christmas. The gap that is left in your family seems huge. Perhaps this is your first Christmas without your child, and you are unsure what to expect or how to face it. Or maybe you have experienced this before, but it isn't feeling any easier with the passing of time. Maybe you were expecting to celebrate your first Christmas with a new-born baby, and the emptiness is a stark and painful difference to the excitement, noise, and fun that you hoped this time would hold.

While there is no way to fully relieve the unique pain that comes with Christmas for bereaved parents and families, we have put together some suggestions for ways of coping with the festive period based on the experiences and advice of bereaved families which were shared on the website www.careforthefamily.co.uk. We hope some of these will be helpful to you or a loved one.

Things you may find helpful to avoid:

- **Doing everything the same as before.** While you may want to strive for a sense of consistency and normality for yourself, your family, or for your other children, don't push yourself. Don't feel you have to keep up with all the events and traditions that you did before. Things have changed, you don't have to act like nothing has happened.
- **Changing everything.** You might desire to do Christmas completely differently this year, and that's okay. But equally, don't discount all the family traditions you have created, as some of these may bring you comfort. If you have other children, such traditions may be important for them too.
- **Don't feel that you need to write Christmas cards.** If you don't want to send them this year, you don't have to. You can reintroduce them in the future if you want to, perhaps adding a kiss from each family member, including your child who has died. Writing can be cathartic and a helpful way to process your thoughts and feelings, but you may find journaling or writing poetry more helpful than Christmas cards this year.
- **Don't put pressure on yourself, or allow others to.** Free yourself of 'ought to' or 'should do' this year. Do what feels right for you and your family. Plans can be cancelled or delayed, and traditions can be paused. You're not letting anyone down.
- **Try not to listen to the hype about Christmas.** At this time of year, it can feel impossible to escape Christmas. We are bombarded with images and sounds of the festive period and the stereotypical 'happy family' online, on TV, on the radio, in shops, and sometimes even at work and at home. It will be hard, but try to focus on what Christmas really means to you, and what you need and want from it this year, rather than what outside influences are saying.

Five things you may find helpful to include:

- **Commemorate and celebrate your child.** You may find it helpful to memorialise your child in some way, so that you can have a focus and a way to include them in your Christmas celebrations, however they may look this year. Perhaps you could choose a special item such as a Christmas decoration or a candle to acknowledge your child. Or maybe you'd like to make something. Creativity and crafting can be an uplifting activity, and if you have other children, this can be a way to include them in remembering their sibling and may help them in processing some of their grief.
- **Encourage memories.** Having photos of your child around, or even some of their favourite toys or other items may help to spark happy memories and conversations.
- **Create new Christmas traditions.** It's understandable that you may want to try new ways of doing Christmas this year. Coming up with new traditions and ways of celebrating can help to create new positive memories to look back on. You may want to incorporate your child in these in some way, or not. Find something that works for you and your family.



- **Make time for yourself.** It can be hard to carve out time for self-care during the busy Christmas season, but it is important that you look after yourself, not just others. Schedule time in your diary just for you to do something that you love or that helps you cope - that could be taking a hot bath, curling up with a book, going for a hike or doing yoga - find something that works for you and do it. Allow yourself time to cry, but also time to laugh as you remember funny occasions from the past.
- **Talk.** Seek out the good listeners in your life and share with them how you are feeling. Talk with your family about how they'd like to remember the child who has died, and do your best to add in an idea from each person, however small.

Some things you could change:

- Have a different type of Christmas meal, eat at a different time, or change the seating arrangements.
- Open presents at a different time or in a different order.
- Break the day into smaller chunks – go for a walk, visit neighbours, friends or family – so that you aren't in the house all day with the pain of your loss.

If being at home seems too difficult, ask good friends or family if you can spend the day with them. Being with people you feel safe with, who will allow you to cry, laugh or just 'be' is invaluable.



Christmas Reflections from Bereaved Parents

In this section, we share Christmas wishes, reflections and a poem from parents who have experienced the death of their child, taken from the online publication Still Standing Magazine.

Still Standing Magazine is the world's leading online voice in breaking the silence on child loss – from conception to adulthood, and infertility. On their website, they share stories from around the world of those who are grieving child loss and infertility. For more information, please visit www.stillstandingmag.com.

My Wish For Christmas After Child Loss by Kelly Cote

My wish for Christmas is that you know how much I love you.
 Wherever you are, I hope my love surrounds you.
 I want you to know you're special to me and that I'm grateful to have had you.
 That you know the place as my firstborn will always be yours.
 I wish for you to feel the depth of my love for you.
 For Christmas, I wish that you're not alone.
 So, I imagine a beautiful celebration with all of your friends who also left their families too soon.
 I envision you surrounded by family who gives you the magical Christmas that I long to give you on earth.
 I hope you can see the tiny tree placed next to your urn and the candle we light just for you.
 For you know you're not forgotten would mean everything to me.
 I pray that you're proud of me and see I'm better because of you.
 My wish is to hold you one more time and to whisper "I love you" in your ear.
 I'd give anything to see you again, to watch you open your eyes, to hear you call me "Mummy."
 For Christmas, I just want one more moment with you.
 However, I know that can't happen.
 Therefore, I'll settle to know we will be reunited when my time on earth is done.

I want to know you will wait for me there and that once we're together, you won't leave me again.
 I wish that your brother and sister got to know you.
 That you could play with them and teach them things that only big brothers know.
 I wish I could hold all my children in my arms and that our family could be whole again.
 This Christmas I hope all the grieving families can feel the love of their children and that no child is forgotten.
 I wish people say your name.
 That all the missing children's names are said because that is the best gift of all.
 I wish that no other children have to die.
 That no other families have to hang a stocking in memory of their child, knowing that it won't be filled.
 I wish that people start acknowledging the children who have passed away.
 That the world can stop silencing child loss.
 I wish that nobody feels alone on this journey.
 This Christmas, I wish it's as gentle as it can be.
 That the toys I donate in your honor bring joy to others.
 I wish for peace and comfort for every grieving family.
 I wish all the children are remembered and their families to know they are not alone.

Seasons Without You by Helen

My son was born in March. Spring; the season of new life. I brought the beautiful, healthy little boy I had carried for nine months into the world, and two days later I watched him fade away. Spring escaped me.

And then, somehow, it was Summer. The Summer I had dreamed of, with warm days and rainy nights. The Summer that I would spend taking long walks with my son nestled in his pram, the Summer that I would plant flowers in our garden, and watch them grow, with him. There were no flowers in our garden. Nothing grew or thrived. Summer came and went, barely noticed, spent indoors huddled together in grief.

And up crept the Autumn. The season of wellington boots, crunchy leaves, finger-paints and first pumpkins. My favourite season of all – the one I had planned for a lifetime. September: a naming ceremony, blue bunting and cupcakes, and a lifetime of dreams to unfold. The six month anniversary of Aidan's birth and death. No cupcakes, or bunting. No dreams. Just a name washed away by tears and the tide. Sand under our fingernails and loss weighing heavily in our hearts.

Winter is here now, with it's frosty chill. Our perfect Christmas will slip away. Invalid, ignored. No toy cars under our Christmas tree, no excitement on Christmas morning. Just a solitary Christmas bauble which bears a name that is music to my ears, yet I barely get to speak out loud. Snowflakes will fall and the year will end. A fourth season without my son. The final chapter in our first year without him.

And then it will be Spring, again. A new season, a new year. Without him. Always. But with him, still.

'Twas The Night Before Christmas (Bereaved Mum)

by Larissa Genat

*'Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house,
 Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.*

*Except the bereaved mom, who was tossing and turning,
 Nursing her heart that was once more breaking.*

*The time had arrived! Christmas was here!
 Would they remember? Perhaps not, was her fear.*

*Her arms would look full to the outside observer,
 But she knew in her heart, one child was missing forever.*

*Missing once more from the big family event,
 How could she survive with her heart badly rent?*

*Would she put on a brave face, maybe sob in her bed?
 There was no way to know; by her grief, she'd be led.*

*Forgo the tinsel! Forget the main dish!
 Her baby remembered – her sole Christmas wish.*

*Whether people remembered, spoke their name or forgot,
 Would determine her Christmas. Bearable, or not?*

*As sleep finally came for this mama, she knew,
 That her babe's life did matter, though the moments were few.*

*Not in her arms, but watching from above,
 Missed beyond words; remembered with love.*

Christmas is often described as the 'most wonderful time of the year', and the films, songs, and advertisements targeted at children during the festive season can trigger complicated feelings. Whether your child has lost a loved one recently or long ago, this time of year can rekindle feelings of grief, longing, and sadness for children.

Christmas can be full of bittersweet moments. Happy memories of past Christmases with a sibling or family member who has died make their absence during this period even more apparent. But this time of year can also be an opportunity to honour and remember your loved one, and the legacy they have left for a child.

Here are some ways to support a child in your life who is grieving at Christmas.

Be observant

Notice how familiar traditions, sights, smells and tastes, may be comforting, or may jolt your child's emotions. Watch how your child responds to events and be ready to support them.

Communicate with your child

Don't pretend your family has not experienced a loss. Let your child know that you also miss the person who died. Tell your child that you don't like that things cannot be how they were before the person died, and that you love your child. Children may need to hear this to know they have permission to discuss their own feelings. Encourage them to share, at their own pace.

Anticipating Christmas, especially if it's the first one without a family member, can be worse than the day itself. Talk with your child about their feelings and expectations for Christmas. Discuss the activities they would like to participate in or attend, or not.

Share your own feelings

Children will observe their parent's response to a death very closely. While they may not have the same language skills as an adult and may not be able to identify their own emotions, it is important to share your feelings with them. Tell your child that you feel confused, sad, angry, guilty or share any range of other feelings that you may be experiencing as a result of the death.

Give children the space to process information and feelings

Those early conversations with your child after a death are only the beginning steps. Be available when your child is ready to talk. You may not always know what to say, but if your child sees this, they may understand that it is okay to not know what to feel, do, or say, and this can be just as helpful to them as saying the 'right' thing. Even if your child does not frequently talk about the death, do not expect that they are 'over it'. Children grieve in their own time, and differently from adults. Significant milestones such as Christmas may cause the child's feelings about the loss to re-surface, even if the child has not talked about the death for a while.



Tell stories about your loved one

Christmas is loaded with family memories for most people, and so it can be a good opportunity to tell stories about a loved one who has died. Many children have a strong desire to share stories about a loved one following a death in the family. Sharing these stories can help a child feel connected to their deceased family member and help them to heal.

If your grieving child is interested in telling stories about their lost loved one, you can support them by talking about their favourite Christmas traditions. What was the family member's favourite food? What was a memorable gift the family member gave or received? It can also be helpful to remember less happy memories involving a deceased family member. This shows children that negative feelings are okay to share too.

Involve Your Child in Christmas Planning

Asking your child how they feel about continuing with Christmas traditions can help you to gauge what could be comforting to them, and what might be too painful to handle this year. Many children benefit from predictable routines, especially after trauma or loss. Participating in Christmas traditions as they have always been done might be just the thing to help some children. These rituals can help restore a sense of normalcy for children and give them an opportunity to feel close to family after the loss. On the other hand, some Christmas traditions may feel so closely connected to the lost loved one that they are too overwhelming to practice. Asking your child about his or her preferences gives them some control in a tumultuous time. It's okay to keep some things the same, modify others, and leave some traditions for another year.

If you can, try to spend Christmas somewhere where you and your child feel supported, nurtured and comfortable. Don't feel pressured to attend certain events or visit certain places, or see certain people if it doesn't feel right. Plans can be postponed or cancelled altogether. While it may be positive to spend time with family and friends, it might be useful to make an 'escape plan' just in case things become too difficult for you or your child. Trust your hosts to understand if you need to slip out.

Take Care of Yourself

Therapists often use an airplane analogy when talking to parents about self-care. Flight attendants tell you that, in case of emergency, you must put on your own oxygen mask before helping your child. The same can be true during grief.

Children rely on their caregivers heavily after a death. They may become clingier, and need more individual attention, as they heal from their loss. Children also look to their parents to learn how they should be feeling, and to get reassurance that they will still be safe. Caregivers need to take care of themselves, physically and emotionally, so they can have the strength to take care of their grieving children.

Practicing self-care, especially around Christmas, is really important. Plan in some time to do something just for you. Or maybe you'd prefer to relax and do nothing at all. Anything that helps you rest, replenish and restore can help build your resilience so that you can better support yourself and others over the festive period. Remember, your child will look to you to model their own behaviour, so seeing you trying your best to look after yourself can be a very positive influence.



Activities that can help children express their grief

- Allow your child to remember a lost loved one through a tribute. You could...
- Light a candle together at dinner time to remember the person who died.
- Hang an ornament on the tree that reminds the child of the loved one who died.
- Help your child offer a blessing at dinner time that honours the person who died.
- Let your child help you set a place at the dinner table to represent the loved one who died.
- Create a picture or collage with your child.
- Ask your child to choose their favourite picture of their deceased loved one and display it in your home.
- Make a book or slideshow of their favorite stories, photos or quotes.
- Create a poem, song, memory board or prayer.
- Help your child write a letter to their deceased loved one.
- Plant a tree or flower in their sibling or loved one's memory.
- Let your child choose some comfort items from their deceased loved one, which they can carry with them or wear or keep in their room for when they want to feel connected to them.
- Help your child honour their loved one through a gift. They could make something or choose a charity to donate to.
- Read age-appropriate books about grief with your children. Children's books can approach grief in a more general way, which can be less threatening. Books can also normalise the feelings that children have after a death, reassuring them that their reactions are normal and they aren't alone.
- Don't forget to play! Laughter, play and joy are good for your child. Children do not grieve continuously and they need to take breaks from grieving. Encourage your child to play, run and do recreational activities he or she would normally do. Clowning around and laughing (which releases endorphins into the brain) are healthy and normal for children.

However your child feels about Christmas is okay

Children grieve deeply, but the way they show their grief can be different to adults. Adults can remain in mourning for a long time. Even as they get back to their daily lives, they are aware of their grief. Children, by contrast, often grieve in bursts. This may be because they don't have the same capacity to handle deeply painful emotions as adults do.

It's common to see an intense outpouring of emotion from bereaved children, interspersed with periods of calm. It doesn't mean the child has forgotten about their grief, they just need to take a break. The child will 'pick up' their grief again when they are ready to keep processing it.

Because children sometimes grieve in bursts, any reaction to Christmas is normal, okay, and healthy. Children need permission to feel mad, sad, guilty, or frightened about celebrating Christmas without their loved one. They should also be allowed to feel excited, to enjoy Christmas traditions with family, or to anticipate receiving gifts from Santa. Letting children feel whatever feelings come up for them supports them in working through their grief. You can help support grieving children by letting them know that their feelings about Christmas are normal, even if they change day to day.



Wave of Light by Sara Rian

*As a parent
the only candles
you thought of when
the journey first began
were candles on a cake.
Not a sombre quiet flame
flickering in remembrance.
You thought of air gusting from
their little lungs while making a wish.
Not grieving the breaths they won't take.
This light is not meant to take away pain.
It is to let you know that you are seen.
That your grief need not be hidden.
That your child is honored.
They are remembered.
They are loved.*



FirstLight Christmas Cards

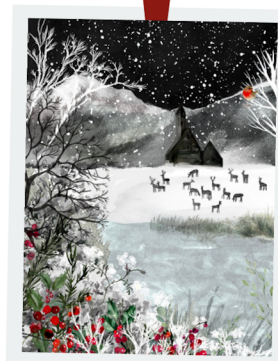
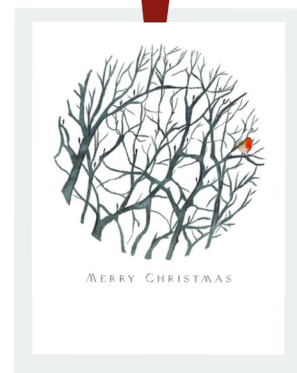
FirstLight Christmas cards are now available to buy on our website.

This year, for our Christmas cards, we have collaborated with children's book illustrator and bereaved mum, Kitty Moss. She lives in the wild woods of Wicklow with her husband Stevie and daughter Willow. They lost their little boy Jude on May 28th 2022 and this collection is in his memory and to celebrate the amazing work of FirstLight.

All proceeds of FirstLight Christmas card sales will be used to fund free professional crisis intervention and psychotherapy for bereaved parents and families who have experienced the sudden death of their child. To purchase your FirstLight Christmas cards to spread some joy this festive season, please visit www.firstlight.ie.

Pricing

- 1 Pack of 6 €10 including p&p
- 2 Packs 6 €15 including p&p
- 3 Packs of 6 €20 including p&p
- 4 Packs of 6 €25 including p&p



Submit Referrals @ www.firstlight.ie

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If you have a newsletter query or a story for inclusion in the newsletter please email info@firstlight.ie