

CONTINUING BONDS



Learning Objectives

After reviewing this Guide you will be able to:

- Understand the concept of continuing bonds
- Recognize or begin to consider possibilities for creating continuing bonds with your child after their death

What are Continuing Bonds?

Continuing bonds theory is the idea that grieving is a process of modifying our relationship with a person who has died rather than relinquishing or releasing the bond altogether. Thus, death does not break the bond between a parent and their child, but rather shifts the relationship.

This theory is counter to what many of us were taught or learned in years past, when it was said that we should “get over” our grief, even go back to “normal.” We know from parents that this is not realistic and that such expressions from well-meaning people can result in further isolation. Grief and bereavement include the longing for your child’s physical presence, touch, voice and the meaning your child brought to this life; how your child interacted with others, enjoyed family activities, and taught you about the preciousness of life. Continuing bonds theory acknowledges that loved ones may naturally continue their attachment with their child through memories, possessions and a desire to create a legacy for them.

“We know the dominant narrative about grief, that it is something to “move beyond” in an effort to seek “closure.” But we feel differently. There is no safe distance when it comes to loving. Havi’s life and death has to be a part of our lives, now and forever, and we hold on to the gifts of perspective and possibility that she gave us. She exists in every moment — our relationship to her is cellular.” – Myra Sack, mother of Havi

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How Do Families Continue Their Bonds?

Bereaved parents naturally find ways of continuing their relationship with their child who has died. Most feel that the rituals they create, or ways of intentionally remembering, are part of healing. It is also the case that these bonds or ways of staying connected are likely to change over time, just as any relationship changes.

Here are some examples, some small and some big. There is no right or wrong way.

- Seeking places and situations where you feel the presence of your child
- Observing your child's birthday or other important days in your child's life
- Having imagined conversations with your child; asking them for guidance
- Including pictures of your child in holiday cards
- Revisiting keepsakes and important memories
- Thinking about what your child would want you to do when making important decisions
- Making the intangible tangible through rituals like balloon releases
- Setting aside time for journaling, introspection, etc.
- Doing volunteer work at places that hold meaning
- Raising money for a special cause or starting a foundation in your child's honor
- Shifting career aspirations as a result of your experience caring for your child
- Preserving your child's toys, clothing, books

On this topic, families who participated in CPN's In The Room event "Continuing the Family Bonds and Honoring the Child's Legacy" (April 2022) shared the wonderful ways in which they have continued to bond with their child:

- Jennifer collects pieces of jewelry that have her son's name on them or remind her of her son. She wears a piece each day to remind herself of her son.
- While Rachael lost her son, Henry, at 9 months, she still brings him into the world and shares his life with the world as much as she shares her living children.
- Maria remembers all the lessons her son Jacob taught her, including the importance of living in the moment. She wears a necklace with her son's thumbprint, and she'll touch her necklace to feel his strength.
- Eileen continues to keep her daughter Naomi's room intact and has a painting of all her children above the fireplace. She loves feeling the presence of Naomi, and is involved at the hospital where her child spent a lot of time.
- Michelle's son William saw the world through the eyes of a child and saw the good in people, and Michelle has made it her mission to do good in his name.

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There are also ways to parent your child privately and publicly. Many parents shared ways in which they still do this.

- Marlena has the family's laundry hamper in Lucy's bedroom. She goes in each night to put clothes in and say goodnight to her daughter.
- When Maria sees a butterfly she believes it is Jacob coming to say hello or give her a message, so she always thanks Jacob.

"Lucy lived, she died, she's very much part of my life still and I love her to pieces. And I'm going to talk about her." - Marlena Field

Common Struggles

Some of the activities of day-to-day living may feel in conflict with your desire to continue your bonds with your child. For example, many parents struggle with how to answer the question of how many children they have. They may also wish for others to know the importance of speaking about their child (or, perhaps, not speaking about the child at certain times). With experience, over time, you will be able to reflect on how to best continue to honor and be connected to your child. As always, these are personal choices and they will differ from person to person, sometimes within the family.



Conclusion

There is no one path to continuing your relationship with your child following their death.. As time passes, you may find new connections; the meaningful activities may change. Ultimately, allowing yourself to feel, process and stay connected to your child will allow for healing.

Related Resources



Book

"Continuing Bonds: New Understanding of Grief"

(Death Education, Aging and Health Care) by Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996)

<https://www.amazon.com/Continuing-Bonds-Understandings-Education-Health/dp/1560323396>

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Continuing Bonds Event Recording

Recording of CPN's Continuing Bonds event featuring a bereavement coordinator and five parents.

<https://courageousparentsnetwork.org/events/continuing-bonds-and-your-childs-legacy>

“Grief in Bereavement - Continuing bonds: over time, the bonds become less externalized and more internalized”

A pediatric palliative care social worker speaks about importance of finding ways to continue bonds with one's child after death.

<https://courageousparentsnetwork.org/videos/grief-in-bereavement-continuing-bonds-over-time-the-bonds-become-less-externalized-and-more-internalized>

“Twin brothers and fathers, Tay-Sachs, bereavement, and their children's legacy”

Two bereaved fathers on how they maintain their children's legacy.

<https://courageousparentsnetwork.org/videos/twin-brothers-and-fathers-tay-sachs-bereavement-and-their-childrens-legacy/>

“It's like planting seeds in her garden. her life keeps growing.”

A bereaved mother on how she finds ways to keep her daughter's life 'still growing.'

<https://courageousparentsnetwork.org/videos/ts-like-planting-seeds-in-the-garden-her-life-keeps-growing/>

“I know from my own personal experience as a parent: Ritual unfolds”

An advanced practice nurse on how finding ritual after death unfolds over time.

<https://courageousparentsnetwork.org/videos/i-know-from-my-own-personal-experience-as-a-parent-ritual-unfolds/>