



www.griefHaven.org

## E-Haven Email (from griefHaven)

Where Hope Resides

### Holiday Message Parent's Bill of Rights

With Love From Susan Whitmore, Erika's Mom



#### Introducing E-Haven

One of our goals at The Erika Whitmore Godwin Foundation and griefHaven is to share with you on a regular basis—beyond our newsletters. To that end, we are very happy to introduce you to our first E-Haven email. We call these “E-Havens.” The essence of E-Havens remains the same: to bring hope and support to those whose children have passed and to educate the public at large regarding how to bring hope and support to parents.

#### The Holidays Are Here—Again:



Ah, the holidays—that time of year where families get together and laugh, share, argue, and relax with their loved ones. We are bombarded with commercials showing loving

families celebrating together and deals to be found everywhere. We remember the times we looked forward to the holidays. Then something changed, and we found ourselves turning off commercials and avoiding malls.

#### One Second In Time

That's all it took for everything to change—one second. Our child died. We went from looking forward to the holidays to expending huge amounts of energy preparing for how we might endure them. This is especially true the first several years after our child has died—until we get a grasp on what works and doesn't.

#### Parents Recommend . . .

Every person grieves his or her own way, no two people are alike, and no one has the right to judge another's way of grieving. The majority of parents do agree on certain approaches that work for them, and we are bringing some of those to you. Again, what works for one does not necessarily work for another, so these are suggestions.

Parents say that making sure to plan something “ahead” of time is one of the most important approaches to the holidays. This way, parents are not blind-sided at the last minute, floundering with ambiva-

lent plans. Parents also recommend doing whatever feels like it might be the most comforting,

“...what seems to work best  
is making sure to  
plan something ahead of time.”

even though at first nothing seems like it could possibly be comforting—pick something that feels right, and follow that regardless of the pressure put out by others. Oftentimes, parents find that each year requires trying something different, since they are in a different place with their grieving, and what was not tolerable one year is the next, so don't hesitate to do something completely different this year than ever before.

#### Making New Memories

Grief specialists say that trying different approaches works because grieving parents and family members are in the throes of making new memories that do not include their child, so doing something completely different makes creating those new memories a bit easier.

Grief specialist Dr. Roger Dafter stated, “The holidays and meaningful events are some of the toughest times for parents and a time they need to be especially mindful of their personal needs—putting themselves first. Often parents don't do this because they don't want to hurt others' feelings or step on any toes. While letting others know what you want and need on a specific holiday helps you cope during this difficult period, **supporting a parent's needs results in parents feeling safe and loved, and it helps them integrate new routines and memories into their lives.**”

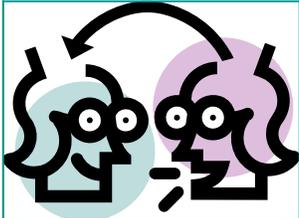
To those supporting parents during the very difficult holiday periods, **listening to and fulfilling their requests is one of the best ways you can show your love and support.**

#### Let Others Know What You Need

Well meaning family and friends can never understand what we are truly going through, nor do



we want them to fully understand such a thing. Often they are invested in not seeing family traditions change, for it reminds them too much of what has happened to you and to the family in general. Often, those closest to us are the ones who will push the hardest for



“tradition to stay as it is.” They generally don’t mean to be selfish or uncaring, so it becomes our responsibility to *enlighten* them in the most patient and honest way we can. Even though it might be awkward at first, if you let people

“We thought we would try celebrating with everyone this year, and we wanted to let you know that it would be very helpful if people would remember to include Robbie in the conversations.”

“I’m so glad you told me. We have wondered if bringing him up was helpful or hurtful so we haven’t said anything.”

know what you do and don’t find comforting. they will most likely want to oblige your requests, even though your needs may change from season to season as you change. For instance, some of you will find looking at photos of your son or daughter comforting, and others are not able to handle it at all. Instead of trying to endure the pain of seeing photos everywhere of your child, what might work better is to let your loved ones know that photos are too painful for you and ask if they would put them away for now.

You might wonder, “Why must I be the one to have to teach *them* what to do? Isn’t that somewhat backward since we have lost so much?” It definitely seems like we should never be expected in the midst of barely hanging on each day to have to “educate” others. Yet another truth seems to hold: how can we expect someone else to understand us or know our needs when we have a hard time knowing them ourselves? We only learn what worked and didn’t once we try something. Every day for we parents is one of trials and tribulations, and our experience has been that most people are grateful to know what we want.

A while back I had the honor of meeting with a lovely and caring man, John Walsh, from “America’s Most Wanted,” a show he started after his son was abducted and murdered. He shared with me that, at the funeral for Adam, his closest friends wouldn’t even look at him or say anything about his loss. This confounded him—something to which we all relate. Yet today those friends admit that they didn’t know what to say or do because no one told them, so they said and did nothing to be safe. This is very common.

### Other Parents’ Success Stories

One mother told us that her family pressured her to celebrate Christmas in the “traditional” way. She didn’t want to upset anyone, so she went along, even though her heart told her, “This is a *bad idea*.” The day was a disaster, since she cried all day, as every nook and cranny reminded her that one person was missing—her daughter. So the next year she and her husband took a vacation. Although being separated was hard on the family, for the parents it was definitely easier. And by year four, they are able to spend Christmas with the family once again.

Here is a list of some things parents have done that have been successful:

- Taking a vacation with just their immediate family.
- Doing something completely different.
- Going somewhere with no past memories of their child.
- Trying a traditional approach, but letting others know if it gets too tough, they will leave.
- Asking others to share about their child.
- Visiting the gravesite or special place and spending time there being with their child.
- Visiting the gravesite or special site with the entire family.
- Going out to dinner instead of cooking at home.
- Inviting other grieving parents to join them.
- Inviting others who have nowhere else to go to join them.
- Reaching out and helping others.
- Going to a theme park with their children.
- Spending time at home alone and pretending it was just another day.

From parents further on in their grief, they assure us that with years of newly made memories comes the eventual return of **joy** and **warmth** during the holidays. Even though life has changed forever, there is a newfound joy each parent eventually finds as time ticks forward—nothing like the “old” joy, but joy nonetheless.

### We Honor You & Your Child

There are so many of you who are an integral part of helping one another, and many of you have never formally met. Every day we at griefHaven have the honor of joining hands with you, walking alongside one another. We see the words of encouragement and hope you share on our message board. We hear your stories and cry with you. We watch as we grow stronger, eventually finding new meaning and purpose in life—something none of us believed was ever possible. Yet others have proven it is possible.

To us, each of you is a hero of the heart, for you have been assigned the most difficult of tasks: going on in life without your child, and doing so without a compass. It is you who are our heroes this holiday season.

So we raise our glass and toast YOU, the moms and dads who love so deeply that their ultimate gift is to keep on going regardless of how painful and difficult it is. Here’s to you and your sons and daughters this 2005 holiday season. And here’s to making the holidays the best we can. No one can ask more of us than that.



### Parents’ Bill of Rights

Borrowing the idea from *Our House* support group in Los Angeles, here are the Parent’s Bill of Rights. We have added some of our own ideas to the original list.

### We Would Love to Hear From You

We would love to hear any approaches you have taken to the holidays that were successful. Also, if we missed anything on the Bill of Rights, please let us know at [support@griefHaven.org](mailto:support@griefHaven.org).



## Parents' Holiday Bill of Rights



**YOU** have the right this holiday season to

- say, "TIME OUT!" anytime you need to;
- talk about him or her during conversations;
- tell the truth when people ask, "How are you?"  
(You have the right to tell them how you really feel.);
- have some "bah, humbug" days;
- do things differently;
- change your mind;
- be where you want and need to be;
- allow yourself to have some fun!
- change directions in mid-stream;
- cry
- laugh
- cry and laugh at the same time;
- remove yourself from whatever you are doing if it gets too difficult;
- do something for someone else (reaching out to others can be comforting);
- have rest, peace, and solitude;
- do it all differently again next year.