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**The Aftermath of Loss:**

**AFTER LOSING SPOUSE, SURVIVING PARENTS STRUGGLE TO COPE,  
COMMUNICATE AND GET HELP FOR THEIR KIDS**

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**Survey of Surviving Parents Finds:**

- 82% agree that the loss is “the worst thing that ever happened to me”
  - 69% often worry about how their children are coping
  - Over a quarter at least sometimes avoid talking about their deceased spouse for fear of upsetting their kids
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**A Widespread Burden: Early Loss of a Parent  
More Frequent than Commonly Thought**

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**Surviving Parents Struggle with Finances, Day-to-Day Routines:**

- More than two-thirds say household maintenance particularly tough since spouse died
  - Nearly half say the loss has “significantly impacted” their standard of living
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**Community Support Critical, But Parents Say It’s Difficult to Find Help:**

- Over half say it was hard to find counseling resources for their kids
  - Insufficient resources: 46% say their child’s school was not prepared to help with the loss; 44%, say their workplace was not ready either
  - 57% say that after their loss, friends/co-workers uncomfortable around them
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**Need Help, Perspective or Guidance Dealing with Childhood Grief?  
Comfort Zone Creates Breakthrough Site for Kids, Parents, Friends and Families**

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**RICHMOND, July 1, 2010** – Parents who have lost a spouse or partner struggle to cope and communicate and are looking for greater community support, according to the results of a survey

of bereaved parents released here today by Comfort Zone Camp, the nation's largest non-profit provider of childhood bereavement camps.

A strong majority of parents who lost a spouse/partner (82%) say that their loss is the worst thing they've ever experienced and 69% still think about their spouse every day. Worse yet, many parents remain uncertain and concerned about how best to support their kids.

"The loss of a parent is devastating for a family," said Comfort Zone Camp founder and chief advocate Lynne Hughes. "Overwhelmed by grief and concerned for how the rest of the family will cope, many parents and kids alike keep silent about their feelings and deny themselves the help they need so much."

And more families may be struggling with loss than may be commonly thought. Companion research of 1,006 adults conducted by Comfort Zone Camp late in 2009 found that one of nine (11%) had lost a parent before age 20; more than one in seven (15%) had lost a parent or sibling before turning 20.

The impact of early loss is immense and can span well into adulthood. Among adults who lost a parent growing up, more than half (55%) would trade a year of their life for one more day with their parent. Nearly seven in 10 (68%) believe their life would have been "much better" if their parent had not died when they were so young.

"Family bereavement is pervasive, yet rarely examined, and sorely needs a more concerted societal response," Hughes said. "Every community needs to help give bereaved families the voice they're struggling to find, and make a greater effort to deliver attention and services to those in grief."

The poll of 261 parents who lost a spouse/partner and who still had children under the age of 19 living at home was conducted among Comfort Zone parents via the Internet between January 11, 2010 and March 26, 2010 by the national polling firm Mathew Greenwald & Associates, Inc. The research was underwritten by a grant from the New York Life Foundation.

"This research is part of a series of surveys designed to better understand the dimensions of family loss and what we can do to ease the grief journey," said Chris Park, president of the New York Life Foundation. "Our goal is to raise awareness of the issue and to focus on helping young people learn coping skills that will help them deal with their loss throughout their lives."

### **The New Normal: A State of Constant Concern**

For bereaved parents, worry is a constant – from dealing with their loss day-to-day to the possibility of additional loss.

Almost seven in 10 (69%) parents who have lost a spouse often worry about how their children are coping. Just over half (52%) agree that their children are having more trouble concentrating on school work and more than a third (34%) say that their children have lost interest in activities they used to enjoy. One third have noticed their children seeking more alone time.

The vast majority of parents strongly agree or somewhat agree that their loss is “the worst thing” that has ever happened to them.

“Part of the shock of loss is suddenly realizing that the worst thing that *can* happen *has* happened,” said Hughes, who herself lost both parents by the age of 12. “There’s a feeling that your world has been knocked from its foundation -- and that you will live forever on shaky ground.” Indeed, more than six in 10 surviving parents strongly agree say that their loss has “made me more worried about bad things happening” (63%).

### **At a Loss for Getting Help**

Bereaved families have a wide range of needs, and getting help is an ongoing challenge.

Eighty-five percent of surviving parents say they wish there were more resources to help them with their kids. More than half (53%) say it is very or somewhat hard to find counseling resources for their kids.

Virtually all parents said that they spoke with at least some of their kids’ teachers immediately after the loss, and most indicated they have continued to have these conversations with teachers each year. But nearly half of parents (46%) felt that the schools were not well prepared to help.

“Every child who has experienced a loss spends the bulk of their day in the company of adults who – in all likelihood – have little experience or expertise in helping bereaved kids,” said Hughes. “Schools, in particular, need to make sure that teachers and counselors are educated about grief and well equipped to help grieving children navigate the school day.”

The needs of bereaved parents run the gamut – from the domestic, to the financial, to the psychological.

Following their loss, parents said they need help first and foremost with household maintenance and secondly with childcare/domestic help. Family finances – from earning enough money to maintain their family’s basic lifestyle to saving for their kids’ college education – are also challenging. In fact, 49% of the surviving parents surveyed said that their loss has significantly impacted their family’s standard of living.

For a majority of parents, it’s hard even to understand what their children need. Nearly six in 10 parents (58%) say they find it hard to know what their child needs from them and 80 percent say it’s hard to know “what is normal kid behavior vs. what is grief related.”

“These findings are a cry for help,” said Hughes. “Everywhere one looks across the landscape of early loss – from child-rearing to finances to household maintenance to their own health and well-being – surviving parents need help. Society – all of us – has to respond.”

### **The Family Grief Conversation – Ongoing, Yet Difficult**

Many families try to cope by maintaining a conversation about the loss. However, the conversation is often difficult, with parents concerned that in sharing their own feelings of loss they risk sharpening the pain of other family members.

Seventy-five percent of parents say they talk to their kids about their grief feelings at least sometimes. But 47% of parents find it very or somewhat hard to have these conversations and over a quarter of parents (26%) say that they sometimes avoid talking to their kids about the loss of their deceased spouse because they think it might upset them.

“Grief can become a self-perpetuating cycle, made even more painful – ironically – by the efforts of family members to shield each other from pain,” Hughes said. “Many parents – and, in our experience, kids -- avoid talking to each other about their loss, a reticence that often makes the loss only harder to bear.

“While family members try to handle their grief alone in an effort to spare others, it’s healthier – and less lonely – to share feelings of grief with each other,” Hughes said.

Indeed, 52%, of the surviving parents surveyed said they wish they could talk more with their kids about “our loss.”

### **In Their Loss, Parents Act Heroically**

While shouldering their own considerable burden, parents are making heroic efforts to help their kids.

Committed to supporting their children, 92% of parents say they try to give their kids a lot of emotional support. They also are taking pains to support the entire family in a coping process, perhaps to a degree that was less common in the past.

Nine of 10 parents say they are keeping family traditions and rituals and doing activities the family used to do together (compared with just 47% of adults bereaved as kids who say their families did this). More than two thirds of parents (67%) say they have sat down as a family and talked about the death, compared with just 26% of adults bereaved as kids.

At the same time, many parents feel their efforts are insufficient – 58% say they need to be of more help to their kids.

“Parents are too hard on themselves,” Hughes said. “Bereaved parents clearly need more support, but our findings offer plenty of evidence that they’re really helping their kids. As our own polling has shown, the vast majority of adults who lost a parent growing up believe their surviving parent did an excellent job given the circumstances.”

### **Friends Help, But Feelings of “Difference” Alter Relationships**

For surviving parents, relationships with friends are often invaluable, but even these relationships can become uncomfortable in the wake of loss.

Seventy-four percent of parents who lost a spouse say that it really helps to talk to friends about their loss. Eight of 10 parents say they talk with their friends about their loss at least sometimes, but usually they are the ones to initiate that conversation. Still, nearly half of parents (47%) find it very or somewhat hard to have these conversations.

Eight of 10 parents say that after their loss they felt like they were different from other adults; 57% said that some of their friends or co-workers seemed uncomfortable around them. Fifty-two percent said some friends stopped talking to them or socializing with them and 61% said it’s hard for them to socialize with other couples.

“The experience of bereavement is so traumatic that it immediately sets the bereaved apart, both in their own minds as well as in the minds of their peers,” said Hughes. “This sense that the bereaved are somehow ‘different’ inhibits the grief conversation all around.”

Over half of parents (52%) strongly or somewhat agree with the statement that “most adults don’t know how to talk to me or my kids when we run into them.” Forty-one percent of surviving parents report feeling pressure from family and friends to “get over” their loss.

“Many of the bereaved are struggling with the most fundamental of challenges: finding the words to articulate what they’re experiencing,” Hughes said. “It doesn’t help that they frequently must contend with friends, neighbors and co-workers who, though well intentioned, struggle to engage them in conversation.”

While the vast majority of surviving parents (87%) agree that most people don’t understand what it’s like to have to raise kids alone, the polls suggest that grieving families have a profound desire not to be treated as “different.”

To supplement the poll of bereaved parents, about 100 bereaved children, all Comfort Zone campers between the ages of 13 and 19, also were asked to share their grief experiences. Their views mirror those of bereaved parents, with many reporting feelings of “difference” from other children, as well as difficulty in talking to family members and others about their grief.

“It’s not like bereaved families are looking for special treatment,” Hughes said. “The vast majority of kids and parents just want to be treated normally. It’s really quite simple. Most families want understanding, an inquiring word, an occasional invitation, and some day-to-day support.”

### **CZC Creates Unique Site for Kids, Parents, Families, Friends and Caregivers**

The issue is that many Americans are unsure of how to engage and be helpful with grieving families.

“Most of us are well-intentioned, but our efforts are constrained by a fear of ‘doing something wrong’ or by a simple lack of knowledge over what to do or where to go for help,” Hughes said.

Comfort Zone Camp has created a dedicated web site – **www.hellogrief.com** – with basic resources for kids and families in grief and their friends, families and other concerned parties. The site includes a white paper on childhood bereavement, a wide range of articles on grief, a bereavement reference section and a camp referral function.

“We’ve combined this groundbreaking research with the knowledge and experience we’ve gained from 11 years of camp, hundreds of monthly support groups, and our national network of licensed grief therapists to create [www.hellogrief.org](http://www.hellogrief.org),” Hughes said. “We think it’s a superior source of information, insights and sharing for families in grief and the friends, families, communities, counselors, coworkers and others who care and want to help.”

For more information on the camps (which are offered free of charge) or how to attend or volunteer, please visit [www.comfortzonecamp.org](http://www.comfortzonecamp.org) or call 866.488.5679.

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### **About Comfort Zone Camps**

The mission of CZC is to provide grieving children with a voice, a place and a community in which to heal, grow and lead more fulfilling lives. As the nation's largest bereavement camp for kids, Comfort Zone Camp has held over 100 camps and served nearly 5,000 children in the last 11 years. Comfort Zone Camp envisions a world where grieving children and their families are not forgotten or left to grieve alone, and are supported by a wide community that understands and appreciates them. To learn more, please visit [www.comfortzonecamp.org](http://www.comfortzonecamp.org).

### **About The New York Life Foundation**

Inspired by New York Life's tradition of service and humanity, the New York Life Foundation has, since its founding in 1979, has provided more than \$130 million in charitable contributions to national and local nonprofit organizations. Through its focus on "Nurturing the Children," the Foundation supports programs that benefit young people, particularly in the areas of mentoring, safe places to learn and grow, educational enhancement opportunities and childhood bereavement. In the last three years the Foundation has committed more than \$4 million to efforts focused on childhood bereavement. The Foundation also encourages and facilitates the community involvement of employees, agents, and retirees of New York Life through its Volunteers for Life program. To learn more, please visit [www.newyorklifefoundation.org](http://www.newyorklifefoundation.org)

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