

MY CHILD'S BELONGINGS

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A recent post on our message board of **Alive Alone** reads, "I'd like to hear from everyone whose children died while still living at home as to how/when they could deal with their child's belongings/reminders. I can't even go into his room; the door is only slightly open. But there are reminders elsewhere in the house- everywhere I turn there is a reminder and I have moments when I want to put away some of those. Leaving everything as it is makes me think that he isn't gone. How did everyone deal with this?"

I have done numerous seminars at conferences for many years about how to handle our child's belongings. Last summer I chose not to do the seminar and I had many requests so I am currently learning to do power point and will be able to do those once again.

First and foremost please realize that there is no correct timing for doing something with our child's belongings. You will know when you are ready for a change. Some parents gain much comfort from seeing, touching, wearing their child's clothing, jewelry or using their belongings. Others find it too painful and need to put things away very quickly. You do what feels right for you WHEN you wish to do it. Do NOT let friends or family tell you what or when to do it. PLEASE do NOT dispose of items too quickly as later you will learn of some good ideas and wish you had not disposed of them.

We first have to decide - what do we wish to keep and display in our home, what do we want to put away and what do we wish to give or throw away. One mother commented, "I'm an apartment dweller and have been for a long time. When my daughter died I left her room the way it was. After about a year, it became too painful to stay in the apartment we called home for so long. I moved to another apartment, one that we had talked about moving into years before. I still kept her things out in a bedroom there. Later I

moved once again and this time I packed many of her things away and just kept out special things. I still have all her belongings and clothes hanging in my closet. When we last lived together she was 14 and had things a 14 year old would have. She would be almost 20 now and a woman. I've been thinking about burning some of her clothes as her taste would have changed as she grew and matured. Sometimes I look at her clothes and I hate them because she's not here and I will never see all the new things she would have had as a woman. They remind me of all her plans that went unfulfilled. I can't bring myself to burn her belongings just yet though. I think I will someday. For me it will be a symbolic gesture of a rite of passage she didn't get to do herself as well as giving her things back to her, if that makes any sense. In my head it makes sense." I have personally found that I have given away, burned, or sold some of Rhonda's belongings very slowly over the years. We are currently moving to a new home so I burned 4-H projects and school books and notebooks this past summer that I had kept for many years. My reasoning was that had Rhonda lived she would have disposed of them long ago and I would rather dispose of them myself than to have someone else "snooping" through her personal items and getting rid of them if I should become ill or die and not do it before that occurs. Another mother commented, "It has been 15 months since my daughter died and we have left her things pretty much exactly as they were the last time she walked out the door. I have moved a couple of things from other rooms into her bedroom. I can't disturb what is in there - it is her space and always will be. I feel like it is a way for me to hang on to her a little bit - she is gone but her things are here and they are here. And they always will be. I go in there sometimes - it makes me cry and miss her more - if that is possible. But, I can't part with any of it and probably won't ever. Some people probably think I am crazy but I really don't care. I have to do what I feel is right for me." Another mother commented, "Our daughter had gone to college prior to

her death but came home often and wanted her room the same. I have made new bedding and curtains recently since it has been ten years since her death. We put up more photos of her and her friends and now I sew in her room. In the beginning it was difficult to look at her room and most of the time I spent crying on her bed. Now we are happy we left the room as it was. As far as clothing I am able to wear her clothes and I also gave some to our friends and family as mementos of her." Some parents have also shared that they made their child's room into a computer room, a recreation room or sitting room. The ideas are as varied as our needs.

As you can see from the above comments what and when we do with our child's belongings is as different as we are as individuals. There is no wrong or right way or timetable. WHEN you decide you want to put some things away be very careful HOW you store items. Do not put your child's memorabilia or clothing in a basement or attic. Avoid places with sunlight or artificial light, away from heat or air conditioning ducts. **A rule to remember is that you want to store items at temperatures that are comfortable for you!** You also want to be very careful to store items in boxes, containers, etc. that are archival safe. There are many companies that deal with these types of storage containers. Many plastics and some boxes have residues in/on them that will cause items to yellow and/or deteriorate. Also be careful with photos for the same reason. Some people think they will store photos and items in safe deposit boxes. Some of these boxes' paint has chemicals in them that will also cause damage over time. So it is best to FIRST put the items in an archival container and THEN put it in a safe deposit box.

If you decide to give items away, as many parents do, then you will need to decide if you want to chance seeing others use or wear your child's belongings. For some it gives them comfort to know that a family member or friend is wearing or using their child's personal items. For others it is too painful. Other parents give some of their child's belongings to those less fortunate and it gives them a sense of satisfaction that

what belonged to their child is helping someone else. Our nieces and Rhonda's friends were elated to get some of her earrings and other pieces of jewelry that I did not want. Others chose some of her books and music. Other parents have mentioned giving skates, skateboards, and other sporting equipment to those who would appreciate it. Toys and books have been donated to hospitals and churches. Some parents have sold their child's belongings and used the proceeds for a memorial scholarship in memory of their child or donated it to a cause in which their child had expressed an interest. Once again giving your child's belongings is a personal choice and you will know when you are ready to do so.

If you decide to keep and display your child's belongings there are a myriad of things you can do. Large items such as vehicles may be used in very creative means. One father painted his son's car to commemorate him and takes it to car shows. The plaques and trophies that they have won are now on display in his bedroom. Another family decided to decorate their son's truck with American flags, bunting and their son's photo on the side of the truck. They chose patriotic music to play from the stereo system and entered it into the Memorial Day parade at their hometown. It was so popular that they are now invited to be in all the parades. This gives them an opportunity to commemorate their son and also to 'introduce' him to those who never knew him fourteen years ago. One mother has a note in their car's back seat ash tray, "Do not remove this gum as it belonged to my son." Whenever their car is serviced she is assured that her son's gum will not be removed.

Some people use their child's toys as part of their room décor. One mother has special shelving that she changes her child's small toy displays in periodically. My husband refinished Rhonda's wooden table and chairs that she had used as a little girl. For many years we used it in our living room with a lamp that contained butterflies. We would then remove the lamp at the Christmas holidays and we placed a small five foot artificial tree on top of the table. This tree was decorated with crystal angels

and butterflies that we had collected for a few years.

I plan to take a section of our finished basement in our new home and display some of her toys and children's books along with some antiques of mine. This will be a corner to commemorate Rhonda and at the same time provide a place for children to play when they visit our home. I got this idea from visiting Showplace Homes in Ft. Wayne, IN a few weeks ago when they had taken a section of their basement and had equestrian memorabilia displayed as their hobby. Another mother communicated with me that she retrieved her sons' old rocking chair from the attic and put their teddy bears in the chair and placed it in their family room. I have seen old wagons used inside and outdoors with plants and flowers displayed in them. When landscaping and decorating think about your child's toys and memorabilia to see if there is a means of using their items to make your space more meaningful. It will also give you an opportunity to talk about your child when people mention these items.

One father has a coffee table with a drawer that slides out under a glass top. He changes this table often, using his child's belongings. This is a means of starting a conversation about his child when guests visit and seem not to know what to say. There are all types of curio cabinets available in which we can use to display our child's belongings. I have also seen some beautiful means of displaying child's memorabilia behind glass picture frames that are deep enough to accommodate clothing, jewelry, certificates, drivers' license, baptismal memorabilia, photos and many other items. I have a small frame that has an oval protruding plastic cover in which I have put Rhonda's class ring inside along with some memorabilia of her school activities. We used a hair ribbon to hang the frame and on the back I have put a poem about the class ring that was written in memory of a young person who died at a young age.

We will continue with this topic in future issues using specific items, addresses and ideas of how to display your child's belongings. Your ideas are welcomed.