

THE MYTH OF PERFECT PARENTHOOD

The feeling of worthlessness is strong in many bereaved parents. I believe that the myth of Perfect Parenthood that is deeply set in us is one of the main causes. We expect that we will raise perfect children, provide them with the very best we can afford, and most of all, we will see that they are safe and secure in their lives. Then when the unspeakable happens, and our child dies, we feel we have failed totally and completely.

We didn't see the unhappiness in our child in time to prevent his suicide. We didn't spot the symptoms of her illness in time to prevent her death. We let her take the car instead of driving her ourselves. We were enjoying ourselves somewhere else when he was run down by a careless driver. It is our fault. We failed to be a perfect parent.

It sounds ridiculous, but unconsciously, below our awareness, lies the idea that if we had been doing our job as "Good Parents" we could have prevented our child's death.

Not one of us has ever said: "I expect to be the perfect parent", but on all sides of us it is implied that we should be. The television and advertising media are big contributors to this myth. The "Father Knows Best" type of television program convinces us that we should be Perfect Parents. The parents in the TV shows always see that their child is depressed and knows the right words to talk him out of it. The TV mother always discovers the illness in time for the doctors to cure him. The TV child has been taught to drive carefully and if he does get into an accident, he comes out of it with fixable injuries.

Advertising tells us the right things to use to raise perfect children. If they are not perfect it tells us the right things to use to make them that way. It even tells us what insurance to buy that will help us pay for that perfection.

We ourselves, expect to do a better job of rearing our children than our parents did. All around us, other parents SEEM to be doing a better job with their children than we are.

We are bombarded from all sides by the idea that we should be perfect parents. Even before our child died, many of us have felt inadequate as parents at times, but when our

child dies we see ourselves as total failures. Our unconscious mind tells us we were not a perfect parent, so therefore our child is dead. It tells us we failed. It says we are worthless.

How unfortunate this is. As human beings we can't be perfect parents. We need to realize that we did the best we could have done for our child with the emotional, intellectual, and material tools we had. Our child's death, no matter what he died from, was not caused by our failure as parents.

We need to be aware that this myth of Perfect Parenthood is actively at work in our subconscious minds and feeds our feelings of worthlessness. The pain of the loss of our child is devastating enough, we don't need to beat ourselves down even further by allowing this myth to consume us.

For Emily's birthday in April, we again came together. We decorated as we would have for a birthday party. While we called "Emily's Birthday Party", it was in reality, a celebration that she had been born and had given us so much joy. This time each of us wrote notes to Dorothy sharing our feelings about our loss and about the gift Dorothy had given us in Emily. (Again we cried and comforted each other. Again, we affirmed the rightness of openly expressed grief.)