

Intentional Parenting of Children Born After a Perinatal Loss

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This article addresses the notion of intentional parenting from the viewpoint of bereaved parents. Information comes from the authors' qualitative research with parents who experienced a perinatal loss. Parents provide a different perspective of intentionality: that of valuing their children's life as a gift and not taking their parenting responsibility lightly. Their descriptions of intentional behaviors, beginning in pregnancy, support the need for further research in the area of parenting after a loss.

In the context of this article, intentionality signifies a course of action where parents adopt a parenting style in which spontaneity is avoided and deliberation, intent, and planning are valued. When parents become pregnant, even when unplanned, most intentionally want to raise an emotionally healthy child. Yet there is scant information in the literature regarding what it means to parent with intention. Briem (2011) describes intentional parenting as a work in progress through trial and error, emphasizing ritual as a way to create patterns of connecting. Others have described transforming family life with more intention by being more predictable, connecting, giving children an identity, and enacting important values within the family (Doherty, 1997). The idea of intentional parenting is strikingly different when parents suffer the loss of a baby during pregnancy or in the newborn period.

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This article addresses the notion of intentional parenting using the voices of bereaved parents raising children born after a perinatal loss. Information is drawn from a secondary analysis of both authors' qualitative research with parents who have experienced the loss of a baby and are raising subsequent children.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intentionality of one's parenting role can begin early in pregnancy. The mother's ability to make emotional room for the baby during pregnancy first takes place at the level of imagining, shaping a parent's psychological readiness for parenthood (Slade, 2002). Winnicott (1987) describes the "holding" environment provided by the nurturer as providing the infant's first experience with extra-uterine life (p. 96). Others suggest that "the process of the holding environment may be influenced early by the mother's psychological adaptations to pregnancy and the emotional development that she experiences as she comes to accept, or not, the infant developing within her" (Thayer & Hupp, 2010, p. 11).

Perinatal loss drastically changes both the psychological adaptation to pregnancy following a loss and parents' image of a growing unborn baby. The holding environment of both parents can entail increased fear and anxiety that the outcome of loss will be the same as before (Cote-Arsenault & Mahlangu, 1998; Hughes, Turton, & Evans, 1999; Statham & Green, 1994; Theut, Moss, Zaslow, & Rabinovich, 1988; Warland & Warland, 1996). Rather than anticipating a healthy outcome, acceptance of an infant developing within for many parents changes to avoidance of attachment for fear of another loss (Powell, 1995; O'Leary & Thorwick, 2008).

Bereavement in fathers is less well researched, but it has been shown that they are deeply affected and changed after perinatal loss. One study indicated that if a loss occurs before the father's sense of reality of the pregnancy develops, "the father may be relatively unaffected and able to go on with his life; because the pregnancy was not real, there is nothing to grieve" (Jordan, 1990, p. 312). Others have found that a significant number of fathers mourn their partners' miscarriages (Alderman, Chisholm, Denmark, & Salbod, 1998; McCreight, 2007). Fathers may show a lesser degree of attachment to the fetus. This may be because the pregnancy is more of symbolic importance in the life of a father and not a major part of his daily activity (Hughes & Page-Lieberman, 1989). This supports why others have found fathers view their role very differently in the pregnancy that follows (Armstrong, 2001; O'Leary & Thorwick, 2006a).

Both bereaved parents may also respond with excessively vigilant, overprotective behaviors or express their sense of vulnerability by needing constant reassurance regarding the physical health of their unborn subsequent child (O'Leary & Thorwick, 2006a, 2008; Warland & Warland, 1996). Emotional cushioning during the next pregnancy to protect

themselves from another loss (Cote-Arsenault & Donato, 2010) can also extend well into their parenting of their subsequent child (Rosenblatt, 2000; Theut, et al., 1988; Warland, O'Leary, McCutcheon, & Williamson, 2011). This has been described in the past as "vulnerable child syndrome" (Green & Solnit, 1964). The caregivers' perception of a child as an intentional being lies at the root of sensitive caregiving and is the cornerstone of secure attachment (Fonagy, 1998). If secure attachment does not occur, then this may impact on the emotional development of the adult. For example, adults who were the child born after a loss in their family of origin have also voiced emotional cushioning in regards to their parents' behavior raising them (O'Leary, Gaziano, & Thorwick, 2006). Some of these adults reported that this cushioning resulted in attachment issues that continued into adulthood.

In spite of these reported findings, our combined studies from two different continents with similar participant groups have found a previously unreported common behavior in regards to bereaved parents. We found that the loss of a baby caused these parents to describe their parenting style with the child that followed a loss to be different than their peers and families, a style some labeled as "intentional," the subject matter of this article.

METHOD

The behaviors described in this article are from the first author's descriptive phenomenological studies with parents during their pregnancy following loss and both authors' qualitative research with parents raising children after a perinatal loss. Qualitative research interviews are "a specific form of human interaction in which knowledge evolves through a dialogue" (Kvale, 1996, p. 125), attempting to find truth in everyday lived experience in a systematic and methodical way (Giorgi, 1997). The goal is not to change or to compare, as is often the case with quantitative methods, but to discover, analyze, clarify, understand, and describe human behavior and meaning through reflective dialogue between the researcher and participants around a theme of mutual interest (Kvale, 1996).

Ethical and human subjects approval was obtained from the universities and hospital institution with which the authors were affiliated. All participants in the first study had experienced losses during their previous pregnancy or in the first 8 weeks of life (perinatal period). They were recruited from their health care provider or through a newsletter for bereaved parents. All losses had occurred within the preceding year of the current pregnancy (21 mothers and 17 fathers), except for one family that was 4 years past loss. Nine families had living children at the time of loss. All families were Caucasian and lower to middle class. Fathers were interviewed separately from the mothers (Table 1). The focus of that study was how perinatal loss changes the experience of being a parent during pregnancy. The interview

question asked was "Can you tell me what it has been like being a parent and pregnant after the loss of your previous baby?" This led to further questions based on the parents' dialogue. Findings from this study have been previously reported (O'Leary, 2005; O'Leary & Thorwick, 2006a, 2006b, 2008; O'Leary et al., 2006).

The second study was with bereaved parents who were rearing children and were at least 4 years post-perinatal loss (25 mothers and 10 fathers)

TABLE 1 Pseudonyms of Parents During Their Pregnancy Following Loss

Participant(s) and age	Losses	Children prior to loss	No. of weeks pregnant at interview
Rita, 37	3 losses (17 wks., 16.5 wks., 18 wks.)	5 and 3½ yrs.	24
Joy, 35	2 losses (9 wks. and 20 wks.)	8 yrs.	35
Karen, 33; Tom, 34	2 losses (stillborn at 41 wks. and baby 8 wks. after birth with heart defect)	None	24
Annie, 31; John, 32	1 loss (stillborn at 38 wks.)	None	34
Sharon, 32	2 losses (8 wks. and stillborn at 36 wks.)	6 yrs.	32
Martha, 36; Terry, 38	1 loss (20 wks.)	3½ yrs.	33
Michelle, 28; Rob, 33	1 loss (stillborn at 32 wks.)	2½ yrs.	32
Kate, 29; Mark, 59	3 losses (8 wks., 7 wks., 12 wks.)	None	23
Susan, 30; Bob, 28	1 loss (stillborn at 24 wks.)	4 yrs.	23
Doris, 31; BJ, 30	3 losses (8 wks., stillborn at 38 wks., another miscarriage at 9 wks.)	3 yrs.	30
Alice, 29; Matt, 30	3 losses (7 wks., 5 wks., baby born at 30 wks. gestation who died at 31 wks. of sepsis)	None	24
Tina, 34; Dick, 36	1 loss (stillborn at 37 wks.)	6 and 3 yrs.	30
Doris, 35; Stan, 34	1 loss (stillborn at 40 wks.)	None	25
Anna, 28; Kyle, 33	2 losses (twin boys at 22 wks.)	None	25
Janice, 32; James, 38	3 losses (triplets at 20 wks.)	None	26
Stacy, 28; John, 36	2 losses (twin girls born at 24 wks. died 11 and 13 days later)	None	27
Suzy, 40; Luke, 33	1 loss (boy born at 8 months; lived 16 hrs., multiple abnormalities)	None	28
Sally, 33; Greg, 41	1 loss (29 wks.; Potter's syndrome)	3½ yrs.	23
Theresa, 33; George, 34	1 loss (daughter at 22 wks.)	None	28
Kay, 35	1 loss (boy 30 wks., 2 days with no trachea; lived 2 hrs., 10 min.)	None	37
Gary, 38	1 loss (boy 18 wks.)	None	31

(Table 2). The research question asked was “How has the loss of a baby changed your parenting of other children?” These families, recruited via snowball sampling from other bereaved parents who knew about the study, were also Caucasian and lower to middle class. Fathers were interviewed separately. The research question opened the dialogue to reporting lived experiences of the phenomenon. Findings from this study have also been previously reported (O’Leary & Thorwick, 2006b).

The second author’s study involved 13 bereaved parents (10 mothers and 3 fathers; participants indicated by an asterisk in Table 2) whose time since their loss ranged from 4 to 20 years. They were asked “Can you tell me about your experiences of raising a subsequent child?” The families were recruited through convenience sampling via a bereavement support group newsletter. These families were all Caucasian, Australian middle-class families. The fathers were interviewed together with the mother. The results of this study have been previously reported (Warland et al., 2011).

The main theme arising from the first author’s research was how parents were changed people because of experiencing an infant loss. The main theme of the second author’s study was that bereaved parents frequently adopted a “paradoxical parenting style” where parents were, for example, at once trying to be emotionally close and emotionally distant from their subsequent child. When we discussed and compared our findings, we noticed a common descriptor used by parents across our research, that of using words like deliberate choice, conscious choice, and intention in describing their parenting behaviors. After completing a secondary thematic analysis, we found that bereaved parents described this intentionality beginning during their subsequent pregnancy and continuing into their parenting of their subsequent child. The overall theme that arose from this secondary analysis was “parenting with intention.” We identified three subthemes: (a) treasuring time with the baby, (b) new awareness of fetal movement, and (c) individualizing the baby during pregnancy. Five further subthemes were identified during parenting: (a) changed view of self as parent, (b) intentionally different from others, (c) finding a balance, (d) judging others, and (e) wanting others to understand. This article will describe each of these subthemes using the voices of the participants to show what we mean by intentional parenting and why parents say they became intentional.

FINDINGS

Intentional Parenting During Pregnancy

TREASURING TIME WITH THE BABY

When people ask “When is your baby due?” most parents think “pregnancy,” not “a baby already present.” The pregnant parents we interviewed were very different. No longer assuming they would have a baby to parent for a

TABLE 2 Pseudonyms of Parents Raising Children After a Loss

Participant(s)	Years since loss	Type of loss	Subsequent children	Living children at time of loss
Annie	4	Twins at 22 wks. gestation	2	
Abby and Mike	9	Boy, heart defect; lived 22 days	2	
Ali and Bob*	5	SIDS	3 (including twins)	
Anita	23	Stillborn daughter	2	1-year-old daughter
Barbara	51	10 pregnancies: first child stillborn, one miscarriage, and 9th pregnancy was a daughter with genetic abnormality who lived 16 days	7	6 living children when daughter died at 16 days
Bridget	4	2 miscarriages	2	2-year-old
Colin and Debbie*	5	Stillbirth	2	
Carol and John	6	Boy with genetic abnormality	2	
Diane	20	Stillborn son	1	
Faye*	4	SIDS; also miscarriage at 12 wks. between live children	2 (also pregnant at time of interview)	
Francis	23	2 mid-trimester miscarriages	2	
Gayle*	5	SIDS	2 (also pregnant at time of interview)	
Hap and Mary	50	Boy with genetic abnormality	1	
Heather*	8	SIDS	1	1
Izzy*	11	Neonatal death	3; including one adopted	
Jill*	9	2 miscarriages (7 and 16 wks.) and one child (viral brain swelling) at 2 years of age	3	

Joe and Margie	20	3 miscarriages before live births and 15 miscarriages after	2	2 boys after first three miscarriages; adopted girl after the other miscarriages
Joseph and Kate	20	Stillborn son	3	
Kate and David	9	Boy with genetic abnormality; lived 89 days	1	
Kelly and Lewis*	20	SIDS	3	4 (Lewis had 3 and Kelly had 1)
Kathleen	10	Son with genetic abnormality; one miscarriage	2	
Linda	20	Stillborn daughter	2	3-year-old girl
Lara	25	2 second-trimester miscarriages	2;	both high-risk pregnancies
Madeline	48	Girl; genetic abnormality; lived a few hours	2	
Mary*	16	SIDS, one miscarriage between living children	2	
Mona	23	Boy; hypoplastic left heart; lived 24 hrs. followed by second-trimester miscarriage	1	Girl, 3; boy, 18 months
Naomi*	6	SIDS	1	2
Patricia and Dave	10	Son with heart defect; lived 3 years	2	18 months
Rita and Bob	8	Daughter; severe birth trauma; lived 24 hrs.	1	
Sharon	8	Stillborn son	2	
Shawn and Matt	10	Boy with genetic abnormality	2	
Sheri	24	Stillborn son	2	
Martha	32	Stillborn son	2	
Tricia	42	Premature daughter; lived 11 hrs.	3	2-year-old

*Participants from second author's study.

lifetime, they became intentional in their awareness of a child growing within. Unlike their previous pregnancies, parents were acutely aware that time spent with the unborn baby was precious and not to be taken for granted.

In the back of my mind, this might be the only time I have with this baby.
(Susan)

I don't take anything with the baby for granted. So I'm really trying to stay in tune to what the baby's doing. (Michelle) These little toes wiggling under your ribs and stuff. I don't remember ever paying attention to that the first time because I didn't know what it was. (Sharon)

This meant that both mothers and fathers took the opportunity to begin parenting their baby before birth:

From the time I knew I was pregnant my husband started singing a song every night at bedtime to these kids. I did too and prayed to them. And even the miscarriages; they were people to us, because we really believed that those beings were important. (Margie)

I am taking a more active role in the pregnancy by just asking her, being more of an active parent to the baby, because even if it's not in the outside world you're still its father. There's not a day goes by that I don't want to know what's going on with my child. (Bob)

When I talk to her stomach, the baby's right there . . . I'm starting to make a connection that it hears me, it recognizes my voice. It's breaking down the walls. I told [my wife] the other day that I felt a moment of excitement that this is going to happen. But it's still kind of fleeting, because I still don't want to let my guard down. (Terry)

He talks to my stomach regularly. We've read books to her. We sing to her. We feel really connected to the baby inside. (Doris)

NEW AWARENESS OF FETAL MOVEMENT

Feeling fetal movement, taken for granted in previous pregnancies, also became intentional for both mothers and fathers. The focus of noting fetal movements changed from being seen as a sign of normal pregnancy to a sign of life.

I don't take any little kicks for granted, any movement. Before if I was at work and I felt it move, I would just keep on working and, "Oh it's just the baby." But now I actually catch myself stopping just so I can savor every last second of the baby moving inside me. (Michelle)

She's been active. I feel blessed to feel that movement because it's her way of telling me she's okay. (Annie) Once I started feeling them I talked to them as if they're here. (Janice)

Fathers became intentional in needing reassurance the baby was still alive. All of the fathers interviewed reported asking their partner for

reassurance, sometimes many times during the day. “It’s probably one question that I ask her the most, every time I talk to her during the day at work. ‘Is the baby moving?’”

INDIVIDUALIZING THE BABY

The need to know the gender of the baby became an intentional request made of health care providers, not because parents wanted to know what color to paint the nursery, but to enable them to begin separating the new baby from the deceased baby.

Knowing the sex helped me relate to this little baby who was growing inside me as a very particular person. (Kim)

I think that approaching Jack’s birth consciously we decided “this is a different baby.” We did decide to have the baby’s gender identified because I wanted to identify and separate them as separate children before they were born. (Heather)

Because Joy did not feel she knew her baby until her stillborn daughter was born, knowing the gender of her subsequent baby helped her to purposely go about making him a part of the family during pregnancy. This enabled her and her husband to name him and talk to him throughout the pregnancy. They also included his older brother, who went up to her abdomen to greet his unborn sibling each morning. “If something goes wrong at this late stage, he’s [in] our family, he’s our son.”

Intentional Parenting in Raising a Subsequent Child

We want to believe all parents are intentional in raising children. But there is a marked difference in how parents who have experience a loss described their parenting.

CHANGED VIEW OF SELF AS PARENT

Bereaved parents have had their lives changed in a second. These parents continued to be aware of their vulnerability as they raised their subsequent child. They consciously appreciated the miracle of a healthy child. The context of the trauma they experienced and the mere fact they have their live children would of course make them different parents. Kim articulates this when she says “You’re a changed person in a lot of ways.” Lara explains: “I cherish my children on a level that I wouldn’t have prior to [my losses].” In addition, according to two other parents:

It’s changed me as a person and as a parent. I feel a lot differently about my children than I would had I not experienced all the losses, really realizing what a miracle that it is—when they come out and they’re

healthy and they have everything that they need to live and thrive. (Margie)

I think you feel like you have a lot bigger responsibility sometimes after losing a child, and realizing how precious children are. (Annie)

Parents also said they had become intentional about ensuring that their children knew that they were loved, telling them this often.

I think we have a responsibility as parents to living children. I have this conversation often because I have a special needs son and an adopted daughter. Once you take on the role of being a parent there's no guarantee of what's in store for you. You do it. I think that on the flip side of that, we chose to have the two boys we have and we owe them a life that is filled with love and caring and commitment and support. (Margie)

Parents understood their own vulnerability and therefore often purposely fostered their children's independence from an early age, as explained by Patsy:

One of my favorite things I ever learned about parenting was we're not there to control them but we are there to help them unfold. I realize my role to help them unfold is going to change the whole course of their life. I always make sure I give reference to what is your idea and then how, if it works, how are we going to work it out or maybe it's a good idea for another day but this is how we're doing it now. But really make sure she is listened to so that she knows she has choices.

Martha was intentional in striving to help her children become independent, partly because she did not want them to feel shackled with her expectations.

I wanted them to learn to read who they were because I really didn't want peer pressure forcing them to be what other people expected of them. I really wanted them to learn how to validate who they were inside. The greatest gift that you can give your child is the ability to know that you trust that he or she can make healthy decisions and you can help them work out what didn't work and work toward better decisions.

At the same time, parents intentionally chose to be quite strict, consciously avoiding overindulging their children:

I guess we have instilled the knowledge of right and wrong from a fairly young age. We have tried to be quite firm, and we make a fairly conscious effort not to spoil the kids. So we don't give them things or give into them with things that they don't really need. I think that is part of

developing their self-discipline. Telling them . . . “the value’s okay, it would be nice to have that but you don’t need it.” (Colin)

INTENTIONALLY DIFFERENT FROM OTHERS

Parents were acutely aware of how their parenting differed from others. They knew that they made decisions much more intentionally than other parents. “I am sure people like us would think through it more than someone who hasn’t necessarily lost a child. You think of different possible worst outcomes I suppose” (Diane). In comparing herself to other parents, Annie commented on how her coworkers might take a day off from work just for themselves when she would just want to be with her daughter. If her daughter was sick, she would stay home rather than take her to day care.

Not that I was much more careful, but “No, I’m not going to work.” Whereas other people would take their sick kid to day care, I was “absolutely not. I don’t care.” I was staying home.

Parents talked about losing spontaneity, becoming quite intentional about the way they parented to be sure they were doing things properly and safely. They knew the worst possible outcome because it had happened to them. They were also conscious of trying to balance being too overprotective. One mother illustrated this by telling a story about her daughter being asked to go to a swimming pool. Rather than giving a spontaneous response, this mother felt she needed to weigh the potential risks and benefits. In the end, the deciding factor for her was the fact that the mother of the birthday child was a nurse, which meant, in her eyes, if her child should have an accident then the nurse would be able to resuscitate.

If it was an emotional decision I would have said “no,” but then that’s ridiculous because she was going to go and have a good time and she was with a nurse and every indication she would be fine, you know? . . . I was comfortable with my decision after I had gone through that process of figuring out why I was concerned and stuff . . . I am sure people like us would think through it more than someone who hasn’t necessarily lost a child. (Ali)

While it is common for many parents who have not suffered a loss to be involved in their children’s activities, these parents were more intentional in why they were doing it. They didn’t get to do activities with their deceased baby.

I’m the Brownie leader, the soccer coach, the Sunday school teacher, I’m the room mom at both classes, I teach art at Kennedy’s class once a month. I feel like I *have* to do all of that. (Sharon)

I can't be super dad, but I would make whatever they want to do their priority. I'm involved in Connor's Cub Scout groups, I bring Darby to dance lessons every class she has. I just feel that with the two children that I have here with me now that I'm going to be the best father than I can possibly be. (Mark)

FINDING A BALANCE

These parents were aware they could be overprotective, so they made mental comparisons with how others parented relative to themselves. They were aware they were different parents than their neighbors and friends.

Other parents in the neighborhood will just let their kids go and have no idea where they are. I just have a hard time with that. I need to know where mine [three children under 8 years of age] are at times. (Matt)

I think we are maybe much more concerned about situations, a little bit more scared in the world than other people would be. Both of us make sure that all the safety rules are followed; you wear your helmet. (Linda)

I think I'm a lot more cautious. I look at what my other friends do and I think "no way." My son will ask me "Why can't I go to sleep over or play when other kids can?" . . . I think he just thinks I'm just strict, but I don't think he realizes the place that it really comes from and I don't ever want him to. (Izzy)

There can be a struggle in finding the balance between being intentional and being spontaneous. Kelly tried to control her thoughts about being overprotective: "I refuse to let my thoughts go there. I will try and change my thoughts." Other parents said they were consciously choosing not to be overprotective.

I think we have tried really hard not to get overprotective; it doesn't stop you from putting your hand on them and checking them from time to time when they are asleep, making sure you can see their chest moving, but I think we have worked hard not to get over the top about it and I think we have been pretty good. Obviously there is a fine line between being obsessive about it; we try not to do that. (Ali)

Parents saw other parents being able to be spontaneous, "just doing their thing," and recognized that they were parenting with more intention. This was described by Karen when she used the word "intention" when comparing herself to other parents.

I think I have a lot more intention in my parenting than I would have had had I not had to struggle so much to be a parent to a live child. Sometimes I look at families and they're just going along, doing what people

do, where I think I spend a lot of time thinking about what is going to be emotionally best for the boys, like not getting babysitters. I feel like I work harder at stimulating their spiritual beliefs, school, finding a balance, not really caring so much about if they are achieving. (Karen)

At the same time, Karen wished she could be like other parents, not be so hard on herself, not take her parenting so seriously.

I think I did a lot of bargaining in my own relationship with God [crying] in trying to become a parent. I said I'll be such a good mom if you give me this opportunity. I'm always putting them first. It's not a bad thing, but I think there is a heaviness to my parenting that can be a little intense.

She explained that her "heaviness" came from not knowing every day if she will get another one, not get to see her children grow up, or go to college or get married. Thus, when she talks about being intentional she says:

I try to be present all the time when I'm with them, especially when they are going to school and there is so little time when you're together. Now their lives are more focused outside of home than they are with me. But I do look at it [parenting] as a gift.

Barbara, now 50 years beyond her loss, provides an understanding of this behavior: "I was probably never more appreciative for the gift of life, for a live birth." She also described her early parenting as feeling "this responsibility of doing things right, probably putting more effort into doing it right than was necessary. If I had to do it over I would probably relax a little more."

JUDGING OTHERS

Bereaved parents have an acute awareness of parents who do not understand the preciousness of their children. They were inclined to be judgmental of other parents, especially if they did not seem to realize that they were lucky to have their children or were not parenting them with the same degree of intention. For example, one mother spoke of how difficult it was for her to trust the care of her children to her partner because he wasn't as vigilant as her:

Well when they go with their dad, he took them swimming one night after he had been to cricket, I panicked the whole time because he is not as vigilant as me, he doesn't think ahead like I do and that is not because I think he would let something happen to them, but he just doesn't think. (Jill)

When talking about being out and about with their children, mothers often still thought back to the time when they were recently bereaved themselves.

After she died I used to get devastated when I saw a parent just leaving their kids in the supermarket aisle and walking away. It would kill me. I know my mother-in-law would say the same thing, or mums yelling at their kids you want to turn around and say "Just be thankful you have got yours." (Jill)

They remembered how upsetting it was to see children who were not being cared for properly after their own losses. Some parents spoke of a need to "do parenting right." One mother explained she felt the need to take on the role of doting mother in public, intentionally choosing to demonstrate good parenting: "I think it's about having this need to . . . even if I am not a good parent . . . appear to everyone else that I *am*, like I am grateful to have them all, you know?" (Izzy).

Mothers also thought that they weren't quite the same as others in the way they felt or acted. They are changed people in that they recognized they had lost their naivety and thought that this had impacted their parenting.

Sometimes I feel like I'm a really bad parent . . . when I'm inflicting some part of my grief on my oldest son . . . I just wish I could be carefree like my friends. (Izzy)

Sometimes you think "oh well," I guess it is good for others to be naive I suppose. We have lost that naivety and we can't get it back. I don't want others to have to go through that by any means. (Debbie)

I appreciate them a lot more than other people do because you think what if I didn't have them. I have to cherish every day even though you have your arguments and you have your expectations of what they are supposed to be doing. (Kelly)

WANTING OTHERS TO UNDERSTAND

Parents recognized that they were parenting differently from their peers and wanted others, especially caregivers and teachers, to be sensitive to this and know the reasons for it. They felt it was important to share the history of loss to help others who might be interacting with their care for their children understand their behaviors.

This became who we are. I feel I'm definitely a different person than I would have been had I not experienced what I did. Frankly, I don't have time for people who want to sweep under the rug or discount my past. A

care provider who's going to try to do that and give me directions on how to parent without taking that into account are not the provider for me because it is who I've become. (Margie)

Communication's the key, if you can express what your anxiety is. They [teachers] want it to be a good experience for your child and they want it to be a good experience for you. I think if they know the history a little bit they're fairly sensitive to it. (Annie)

Having a babysitter or taking their child to day care can be a challenge for bereaved parents. Diane was adamant in being intentional in finding the right person "I remember just having my list of questions and being overbearing." Gayle found that once she had told her child care provider about her situation, she was provided with the support she needed:

I explained my story and they were very, very thoughtful, they even rang me after a week of the boys being there and said "Look we understand your situation, the staff are very aware . . . if you want to ring us five times a day that is fine." I think that happened for a few weeks and then I started to feel a bit more relaxed about it.

Rita and her husband moved (due to their child's maturation) from a day care setting where the staff had been sensitive to their history to one where they didn't seem to understand why the parents wanted more information on their child's day. They pulled their child out of the new center within a few weeks. According to Rita: "When we asked questions they seemed to think we were questioning their ability to do their job instead of finding out just what's going on."

In the next day care setting, Rita described a different comfort level because the staff provided a lot of information on what her son was doing. She believes day care providers and teachers needed to know there was no such thing as trivial information to a parent, especially a bereaved parent. "We want to know that the day care provider is paying attention and we're getting that kind of communication about everyday activities. Instead of 'Everything's fine.' That doesn't tell you anything." She wanted to know what activity he really seemed to like, who he played with, and so forth. She knew the difference between herself and other parents in terms of needing information was attributable to her daughter's death. She compared this to her assertiveness in her parenting behaviors during her son's pregnancy. She remembers being adamant that:

This is my body, my life, my baby's life, all here on the line. I'm trying to trust it to you [medical staff] but I need information. So I guess there is a parallel between those situations. We end up having long teacher conferences because I want to know all the information and figure out how do I do this better or make this situation work better.

She continued this behavior in his school years, still needing information on her son's progress and needing to know that she was doing a good job of parenting.

I go through all his homework and at his last conference I brought the examples back. I had my list of questions. I'm sure that both the teacher and the student teacher were kind of surprised when I walked in with all of this stuff [laughing].

Margie also knew her advocacy began in her pregnancies and continued into parenting. She prefaces her comments by first saying she is not a person who likes conflict or one who would bark at people, but if someone steps in the way of what her children need "you have a lioness on your hand."

The advocate that I am for my children comes from the advocate that I was for them in utero because if they did not survive, I needed to know, for my own health, that I did everything in my power to keep them safe and keep them healthy. And if anyone thinks that once I got them in my lucky little hands [I] was going to stop fighting for them and seeing that they got what they were worthy of getting and entitled to, they were wrong. I'm ferocious.

Lara summarizes what both teachers and health care providers should focus on when caring for any family, not just families who have suffered a loss:

I think the most important thing to understand is how to work within that family's structure rather than trying to put them into some other category or structure. That takes time to do. You have to find out what their strengths and weaknesses are and to honor that. I think the best thing for parents is whatever they feel is best for themselves as a couple and a family is probably what they should be doing, even if someone else says, "Well you should put your child in sports or whatever." Really, parents know what is best for them.

Reasons for Intentionality

Not only did the parents choose to be quite intentional, they were aware of their reasons for being intentional. Parents were clear that their intentionality stemmed from a new understanding that parenting is a gift.

I am so in tune to loving every one of my children every day [of] their lives because I realize life is so fragile. I'm so overjoyed at the delight of being able to parent. (Alice)

I just realize that this is truly a gift and the most important thing I'm going to do with my life. (Karen)

These parents understood the fragility of life and their desire to hold on to their children while they had them. “I have myself a bargain with God, to keep the subsequent children alive. I now have to live a perfect life, so that I am not punished and have more children taken” (Mary).

Jim explained that he had a different perspective on how special life was and did not take his children for granted as he saw other parents doing.

Until you’ve gone through it you just don’t know what it feels like, a different appreciation for who your children are. They don’t know the heartache, they don’t know the anxiety. They can’t [fathom] the emotional roller coaster that comes with troubled pregnancies. They have smooth sailing. I’m sure they’re concerned about their kids, love their kids and want to be safe with them, but they just can’t quite grasp it no matter how hard they try or how close of friends they are. There’s just no substitute for being there yourself. It’s an unwanted fraternity, a club people don’t want to be in.

I so appreciate that they are here and that they are alive. I just really want their life to be well rounded and I want them to be happy and nurture them for who they are. Every day is a gift. I get scared that I’m going to lose one of them before we die. I don’t know how I would emotionally recover from it. The boys are the greatest gift we’ve ever received. (Karen)

We’re just so more guarded. I think we take every little thing to heart. We see a lot of their kids out running around and we are just always out there by them, just constantly worried that their lives could be taken at any moment. In a second they could be gone. I think a lot of people take their kids for granted and we don’t. (Mark)

The perspective of appreciating every landmark, seeing their children as gifts to be cherished, began in pregnancy and extended well into raising their subsequent child.

It was common to hear a response such as Diane saying about her two surviving (now young adult) children, “I keep them pretty tight.” Joe, raising two adolescents, often wonders, when seeing other kids misbehaving, where their parents are. He monitors his kids closely: “Once you experience a loss you’re aware of what that loss can be. So you’re probably just a lot more aware of what goes on . . . keeping a closer eye on what they’re doing and setting closer boundaries.” According to Patsy:

I realize that I don’t own these kids. I learned that very clearly with Darin, 5 days into parenthood. Called back to the hospital, he went into code blue. I saw him marked with death and it was really clear to me that even though he was my child, he was not mine to keep. He was a gift. I certainly hold on to my children tight. Somebody once made a comment, “You hold your kids very tight, like in every picture.” I think I do because I know I’ve been given a certain amount of time with them and I really

want to appreciate that and enjoy that well. There's no guarantee that we'll never have to do this grief walk again. So I do hold on to them tight while I have them, but I don't know if I'll have them forever.

Parents were also aware that people don't really understand the fragility of life until they are faced with a life-threatening illness or death. The loss of their previous child gave them a perspective of cherishing their children in a different way.

Some people wish the days away. "I can't wait until my husband gets home." Quite often I just stop myself and cherish every moment, even when they're being stinkers and being naughty. They are such gifts. (Dawn)

You look at our children and appreciate them a lot more. It's kind of amazing what we went through, what we did to get them from where they were at to where they are now, just the growing cycle. (Annie)

DISCUSSION

It is well recognized that the trauma of perinatal loss changes people and they are never the same again (O'Leary & Thorwick, 2006b; Rosenblatt, 2000; Warland et al., 2011). This is explained in the following quote: "When children die, their parents' embodied ways of being in the world are interrupted and situations call for different responses" (Gudmundsdottir, 2009, p. 256). The parents interviewed during their pregnancy were aware that might be the only time they would have with their unborn subsequent baby. They did not choose emotional cushioning (Cote-Arsenault & Donato, 2010) but used their anxiety and fear of loss to be actively intentional in their awareness of a baby growing within. They began to parent their baby prior to birth, as reported in a previous study (O'Leary & Thorwick, 2008). The mothers' awareness of fetal movement was something to be valued rather than taken for granted as they had in the previous pregnancy, now having a new awareness that their prenatal care needed to focus on the understanding that the "baby is already here" (O'Leary, Warland, & Parker, 2011).

Fathers also changed their behaviors by asking for daily reassurance and affirmation from the mother that the baby was still alive and made time to talk to the unborn baby. Knowing the gender of the baby helped separate the deceased baby from the new baby and allowed for the new baby to become part of the family now, not just after the birth. Both mothers and fathers were aware that these behaviors were uniquely different than their previous pregnancies. These changed behaviors suggest that, for both parents, the holding environment—psychological readiness for parenting and the attachment process, as described by others (Fonagy, 1998; O'Leary & Thorwick, 2008; Slade, 2002)—was beginning during pregnancy. They were intentional.

In spite of the range of times since their loss, all of the parents indicated that they were changed people because of their previous loss and continued this parenting style in raising their children. For bereaved parents, intentionality was not about predictability, rituals, or connections in the family home (Doherty, 1997; Briem, 2011) but about the gift of life. They did not take their children for granted and were more conscious of their children's needs, emotionally, spiritually, and physically, for safety. They understood the fact that there are no guarantees in life and were simply thankful for the opportunity to raise their children. While others might interpret their involvement in their children's lives as unhealthy, these parents saw their involvement as a reward for being able to parent a child who lived. They appreciated the gift of parenting because they did not get to do those activities with their deceased baby.

The parents were very clear that professionals who would be interacting with them needed to know they are strong advocates for their children and understand the reasons why. Their advocacy was a way for them to control what they could control, something they didn't have with their loss(es). This provides insight for health care providers and teachers to understand the importance of asking more questions when parents may appear cautious. These parents are putting their child in someone else's hands and need information to gain trust, just as they needed information from their health care provider during their pregnancies. They wanted to do their best as parents and sought guidance on how they might improve their parenting. They have a different perspective on parenting in that they don't take their children for granted and cherish the opportunity of being able to raise children.

Strengths and Limitations

This is a small sample of bereaved parents who have provided information on how intentional parenting behaviors can surface after perinatal loss. Although we had no comparison group of parents who have not experienced the loss of a child, our respondents' descriptions of watching the parenting styles of peers provided information on how bereaved parents' behaviors might be different and why. The voice of fathers, still underresearched in all areas of parenting, is a strength of this study.

Conclusion

Parenting is something most people do take for granted, which is why there are now popular books and Web sites on intentional parenting. Bereaved parents have a uniquely different perspective of intentionality, that of valuing their children's life as a gift and not taking their parenting responsibility lightly. They no longer assume they will "always have tomorrow" with their children. Their descriptions of intentional parenting beginning in pregnancy support the need for further research in the area of parenting after a loss. Without interventions

to help parents address their fears and anxieties, attachment to the child who follows may be difficult. The fact that these parents consider their children precious and cherish them is certainly an admirable approach to parenting and one that those who work with the bereaved should highlight and encourage.

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