

Supporting the Surviving Siblings



(Some material drawn from the website of *The Children's Room* in Arlington, MA; the *Wendt Center for Loss and Healing*; and from the *American Academy for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* newsletter, July 2004)



INTRODUCTION

When a child dies, even if the death is not entirely unexpected, each and all members of the family will experience a great loss. Although each will experience the loss in their own way, parents very often feel the added burden of having to manage the normal responsibilities of parenting their other children while dealing with their own grief. It is a lot to manage.

There is good news: research has shown that each of us has the capacity to heal and children are very resilient. Here are some ideas to help you support your surviving children—and yourself. You may find that the more you see your children doing well, the more comforted and confident you will feel.

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Talking with Your Child about Death

Having a sibling die may be your child's first personal experience of the death of another person. It may also be your own first personal experience of death, which means that you are processing even more complex issues and feelings.

There are no special words to use when talking with your child about death; the tone you use and your manner of communicating with your surviving children are the most important things. As much as possible, children should be told about the death of their sibling in familiar surroundings, gently, and with love and affection.

Your child or children will likely have questions for you about what happened, what it means, and what will happen next. Explain death in basic terms. Be honest and direct. Here are some ideas: "Died" means the person is not alive anymore. Their body has stopped working. "Died" means they cannot talk, breathe, walk, move, eat or do any of the things that they could when they were alive. If you have religious beliefs that help explain what happens when somebody dies, you may wish to share them with your child.

As a parent or guardian, you may find yourself having to answer many difficult and painful questions, both about this specific death and about death in general, over time. Children are curious, and will try to understand what has happened and what it means. You may be unused to talking about death, particularly with your child. Of course, death is an inescapable fact of life, and it is important that we let our children know it's okay to talk about it. Through your conversations with your child, you will discover what they know and do not know, and find out about any misconceptions, fears, or worries they may have. Talking by no means solves all problems, but without talking you will be even more limited in your ability to help.

Remember that young children can be very literal, and that, despite our best intentions sometimes our words can be frightening or confusing. "If heaven is up in the sky," some children have wondered, "then why are we burying her in the ground?" Or, "If I go up in an airplane, can I see my baby sister who's in heaven?" When adults say, "Your brother is in heaven watching over you," they usually mean to be reassuring, but to a child those words might suggest a spy who sees and knows everything that the child thinks and does.

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What Does Death Mean to Children?

Children typically understand death very differently from the way adults do.

Preschool children usually see death as temporary and reversible, a belief reinforced by cartoon and video game characters who die and come to life again.

Children between five and nine or ten years begin to think more like adults about death, yet they still believe it will never happen to them or anyone they know.

It is often not until children are nine or ten that they may be able to begin to comprehend that death is final, irreversible, and will happen to everyone.

Regardless of their age, an important part of what can help a child understand what has happened is receiving direct, accurate, and age-appropriate information from parents or other caregivers.

Grief: What Is Typical for a Child?

The parent of a child whose sibling has died naturally worries about how well the child is handling the loss, and wonders whether what they are doing, feeling, and thinking is normal. This includes those times when the sibling is happy and playing, when it may seem like they are not grieving. Parents may also worry about what the child is not outwardly expressing.

Each person grieves and experiences sadness in their own way; and grief looks and lasts differently for each person. But there are some common themes and experiences that are helpful to know about and to be watchful for.

Some common reactions children may have following the death of a loved one:

- Having head/stomach aches
- Telling the story of how the person died again and again
- Not being able to talk about the person or the death
- Expressing feelings of being, or behaving, helpless and powerless
- Having trouble sleeping/being afraid to go to sleep/wanting to sleep a lot
- Feeling sad and crying (more than usual)
- Feeling guilty: "It was my fault." "I could have prevented this."
- Feeling angry, confused, frustrated, and/or quick to lash out

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- Being afraid to be alone and not wanting to stay home alone
- Withdrawing from friends or not wanting to go out as much
- Dreaming about the death, having nightmares about the person and death details
- Wanting to be with the person who died
- Finding it difficult to concentrate on work or school
- Worrying about what loved one will die next

Helping Children Express Their Feelings

Young children are typically not able to simply sit with their feelings and may be more physically active, even disruptive, as a way of expressing their grief. (They may also do this to attract their parent's attention.)

The child who has died has been central to the sibling's world, and anger is a natural reaction. The anger may be revealed in boisterous play, nightmares, irritability, or a variety of other behaviors.

The sibling may exhibit separation anxiety—fear of being abandoned by you and other family members, even having tantrums or anger toward these other members, whom they may blame for the loss.

It is crucial to understand these behavioral changes in the context of mourning; that is, your child may not be being “bad,” but grieving. Discussing all of this with your child's friends' parents and with teachers and others close to the family is important and will help you feel responsive and helpful.

Whatever their age, siblings also may not verbalize what's going on for them, and may attempt to continue “business as usual,” behaving as if nothing unusual has happened. This may be a way of trying to keep overwhelming feelings of shock, confusion, and anger at bay. It is also the case that grief comes in waves, with pockets of lightness in between.

Once children accept the death, they are likely to display their feelings of sadness on and off over a long period of time, and often at unexpected moments. Surviving relatives should spend as much time as possible with the child, making it clear that the child has permission to show their feelings openly and freely and showing that even as you are grieving, you are still available to them.

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Finding Support

Children who have been a part of their sibling's illness journey are often reluctant to talk about or share their feelings of loss and sadness because they don't want to burden or sadden their parents further. But talking about the difficult feelings is one of the most helpful ways to process them. You help your child not only when you talk with them, but also when you find them other safe places in which to express their feelings.

You also help your child when you find support for yourself. It is very hard to take care of your family if you are not aware of, and addressing, your own needs.

Support for you, your partner and your other children can come by:

- Speaking one-on-one (or as a couple) with a professional –such as a grief counselor, psychologist, social worker or clergy person. The counselor may also suggest family therapy, depending on the concerns that you discuss.
- Participating regularly in a support group where people meet with others who have experienced a significant loss—parents with parents, children with other children. Children are typically grouped by age and their time together includes a combination of gentle sharing, play and art therapy depending on their development stages.
- Finding ways to be with other parents who are also facing the unique challenges of raising grieving children can be a wonderful support.



CONCLUSION

The Healing Gift

Whichever option you choose, making safe places for hard conversations, and getting support for members of your family to have them, is a healing gift. When you model openness and compassion, you will be showing your children that it is safe to talk about sadness and to ask for help. Although it is being learned at the most difficult time imaginable, this is an important life lesson that will help everyone in the years to come.

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Bibliography

Suggested Reading

Davies, Betty. *Shadows in the Sun: The Experiences of Sibling Bereavement in Childhood*. Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel, 1999. A sensitive and beautifully written book that describes the powerful impact that a sibling's death has during childhood and across the lifespan.

Doka, Kenneth J. and Nancy Boyd Webb. *Helping Bereaved Children: A Handbook for Practitioners*. New York: Guilford Press, 2011. A well-written and thoughtful book describing how skilled clinicians can help children of all ages cope with loss through a variety of therapeutic interventions. One chapter is devoted exclusively to coping with the death of a sibling, and parents could find it helpful to read.

Grollman, Earl A., ed. *Bereaved Children and Teens: A Support Guide for Parents and Professionals*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996. A book with chapters by people who have worked with bereaved children over many years. It covers different ways to help grieving children, including how to effectively communicate and how to incorporate different religious perspectives.

Grollman, Earl A. *Living When a Loved One Has Died*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995. A wonderful book, written by a grief counselor who is also a rabbi, that shares nuggets of advice for anyone facing a loved one's death. It elaborates on the themes that "grief is universal and at the same time extremely personal," and that you will "heal in your own way."

Emswiler, Mary Ann, and James P. Emswiler. *Guiding Your Child Through Grief*. New York: Bantam Books, 2000. A very helpful book written by professionals who have considerable personal experience working with grieving children. The book discusses the many ways in which a child can express grief and provides advice on how parents can help their child and themselves over time. An appendix also provides useful tips for teachers and other professionals.

Finkbeiner, Ann K. *After the Death of a Child: Living with the Loss Through the Years*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012. A book written by a bereaved parent describing the various ways in which life changes after the loss of a child based on her conversations with many other bereaved parents. The book movingly and compassionately describes the different paths parents can take over time and the impact these decisions have on a parent's perspective about life.

Keene, Nancy, ed. *Educating the Child with Cancer; A Guide for Parents and Teachers*. (Kensington, MD. Candlelighters Childhood Cancer Foundation, 2003) This book is a valuable guide for parents and teachers to look for and to address particular learning difficulties that may occur in some childhood cancer survivors.

Mehren, Elizabeth. *After the Darkest Hour the Sun Will Shine Again: A Parent's Guide to Coping with the Loss of a Child*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997. A bereaved mother offers an understanding perspective and inspiration by telling her own story and the stories of other bereaved parents both today and historically. She describes different paths that have brought some parents comfort over time.

Rosof, Barbara D. *The Worst Loss: How Families Heal from the Death of a Child*. New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1995. A sensitive account of how the death of a child shatters the presumptions on which we operate, and how we can slowly rebuild our lives.

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Rothman, Juliet Cassuto. *The Bereaved Parents' Survival Guide*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1997. An insightful, compassionate, and practical book written by a bereaved parent who has worked in the area of grief counseling for many years. The book transmits the message that there is light at the end of a very dark tunnel. However, contrary to the findings of more recent studies, it overestimates the number of parents who divorce after the death of their child.

Schaefer, Dan. *How Do We Tell the Children? A Step-by-Step Guide for Helping Children and Teens Cope When Someone Dies*. New York: Newmarket Press, 2010. An empathetic book that gives practical advice about what to say and do in order to help children of any age who have lost someone they love.

Schiff, Harriet Sarnoff. *The Bereaved Parent*. New York: Penguin Books, 1978. A moving and helpful book written by a bereaved mother that gives practical and reassuring advice to bereaved parents.

Silverman, Phyllis R. *Never Too Young to Know: Death in Children's Lives*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. A book that uses stories from children and bereaved families as well as grief research to explore how death affects children and how to help them cope over time.