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The Child's Journey

Supporting Children After the Death of a Sibling

OVERVIEW

For most children, death is not only a new experience, but one that can also be confusing and frightening. Like adults, children may feel intense sadness and loss when a person close to them dies. And, like adults, children express their grief in how they behave, what they think and say, and how they feel emotionally and physically.

Each child grieves differently, and there is no right or wrong way or length of time to grieve.

Most children have no idea how to deal with loss. Young children may not understand what death really means, and the reactions of others around them may cause confusion and frighten them. When children are asked where their brother or sister is, they will often point to the sky or hold their hands over their hearts.

Children will seek answers and comfort from their parents and other adults in their lives. In the case of the death of a sibling, parents are so immersed in their own grief and in trying to figure out their own way of coping with the loss that they often feel helpless in this role. While you as the parent may not have answers to all of the questions that your child may ask, you can help your child better understand the grieving process and create/model a healthy and loving grief environment that will result in healthy coping skills and a special relationship between your surviving and deceased child throughout the rest of your child's life.

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REACTIONS—Death of A Sibling

The death of someone special can be very difficult for a child, but when a sibling dies, the family faces a unique set of challenges. Siblings often have very complicated relationships. Sisters and brothers often experience a range of conflicting feelings for each other—they may love and look up to one another, older siblings may feel responsible for, enjoy, and/or resent caring for younger ones, or they may be jealous and fight—and their relationships can change over time.

When a sibling dies, these past relationships can affect the surviving child's grief and the family's bereavement process. Grieving siblings may show some or all of the following common reactions, and there are many ways in which parents and others may help them cope.

Survivor's guilt about being alive. This often stems from the child questioning why he was spared when he feels equal to or even inferior to the other child.

Do: Acknowledge that many siblings feel guilty, and correct inaccurate thoughts and information. Reassure your child that all children are different and unique, and that he or she is just as important and loved as the child who died. You should also pay close attention to family members' comments or others who compare the surviving child to the child who died. You should comfort your child and help others understand that these comparisons can be hurtful.

Regrets and guilt about previous bad behavior. Surviving siblings may express guilt or remorse about the things they did or said to the child who died. For example, they may think that they should have been nicer or more helpful to the sibling who died. Surviving children who fought with the deceased sibling or at times "wished" that he or she would disappear or die may believe that their own thoughts or feelings actually caused the death.

Do: Normalize their feelings by telling them that all brothers and sisters fight or disagree at times—that this is a natural part of a sibling relationship. It may be helpful here to explain what actually caused the sibling to die. It's important to acknowledge the siblings feelings or thoughts that they could have prevented the death, while also letting them know that they are not responsible. Explain that wishes and thoughts cannot make something happen.

Ongoing connections with the deceased sibling. The sibling who has died may remain an influence in the surviving children's lives. Although this can be comforting—for example, through pleasant memories of shared experiences and goals—it can also have a negative impact if surviving children idealized the deceased sibling, feel inadequate when they compare themselves to the deceased sibling, or try to replace the sibling by being just like him or her.

Do: Focus on comforting connections with the sibling who died, perhaps by talking with surviving children about happy memories or special life lessons they shared. At the same time, help surviving children to see and appreciate their own unique strengths and abilities and their special place within the family.

REACTIONS—Death of A Sibling, Continued

Questions related to their beliefs and faith. Surviving children's perceptions of—and reactions to—the death of a sibling are often influenced by the cultural and religious background of their family and community. Although the rituals after a death can be comforting, very young children do not fully understand the abstract concept of death, and some older children may question some explanations (for example, questioning a faith that could let their brother or sister die). When talking to children about their sibling's death, try to incorporate not only your cultural and religious understanding of the death, but also a concrete, age-appropriate explanation of what happened.

Caregiver and Family Grief

If you have lost a child, the way in which you handle your grief can affect the bereavement process for your surviving children. In some parents and caregivers, grief over a lost child causes them to pull away or become emotionally absent for their surviving children. When this occurs, the surviving children may feel guilty for being happy or for needing their parents' support. They may fear that their parents will never recover from the loss

YOUR QUESTIONS

Should I talk about the cause of death?

Don't be afraid to talk about what happened, but use age appropriate language. Children do not benefit from being told "not to think about it" or to "put it out of their minds." If a child is not allowed to freely talk about the loss or express sadness, anger and confusion, the child's recovery will be more difficult. It can be helpful for a child to know that you feel sad and for you to share with him how you cope with your sadness, such as "Sometimes I miss Jeff so much. I get so sad and just cry." Your child may or may not say that he feels sad and cries, too. Don't worry if he just listens; he's taking it all in. You can also say things like "I remember how happy we were when we went on that camping trip last summer? Do you remember that trip? Do you remember when we . . .?" Over time, helping your child keep part of their sibling with them in memories, rituals, habits, beliefs and behaviors can be very useful. Also, the formal mourning rituals and beliefs of your culture or religion can be very helpful for children.

YOUR QUESTIONS, continued

Should I talk to others about the traumatic event?

Yes. If you and the child's caregivers feel it's appropriate, you can help to inform adults and children in the child's world what has happened. Let other teachers, counselors, parents of the child's friends, and, if appropriate, the child's peers know some of the pain that this child is living with. In some cases, older children can benefit by participating in this process. Sometimes this can help the people in the child's life be more patient, understanding or nurturing. People can often be intolerant or insensitive when dealing with the pain of a grieving child, sometimes asking, "Isn't it about time he got over this?" When you see that this is occurring, don't be shy about taking this person aside and helping him understand what the child is going through.

As your child gets further away from the event, she will be able to focus longer, digest more and make more sense of what has happened. Don't' be surprised if she even acts as if the sibling is not dead or will be coming back. Sometimes young children act as if they have not heard anything you have said. It takes many individual moments of sad clarity for the reality of the loss to actually sink in for young children. Between these moments of harsh reality, children use a variety of coping techniques, some of which can be confusing or upsetting to parents.

Listen to your child, answer his questions (even if they are very painful: "Did Missy get burned?" As you answer you can provide comfort and support. We often have no adequate explanations about senseless or tragic deaths. It is just fine to tell children that you do not know why something happened or that you get confused and upset by it, too. In the end, listening and comforting a child without avoiding or over-reacting will have critical and long-lasting positive effects on your child's ability to cope.

What is the difference between grief and mourning?

Grief is the label for the set of emotional, cognitive, behavioral and physical reactions that are seen following the death of a loved one. Normal grief responses may include denial, emotional numbing, anger, rage, rushes of anxiety (pangs), sadness, fear, confusion, difficulty sleeping, regression in children, stomach upset, loss of appetite, "hysterical materializations" (transient visual or auditory misperceptions of the loved one's image or voice) and many other potential symptoms. These symptoms are similar to those often seen in the acute post-traumatic period.

Mourning is the formalized process of responding to the death. This includes memorial services, funerals, wakes, mourning dress and so forth. These semi-ritualized approaches are very useful in organizing and focusing the grief reaction in the immediate post-death period. It is important to allow children to participate in elements of this process. A major healing element of mourning is that it allows the grieving person to "have control over" the way in trauma and loss are experienced. Rather than sitting alone with recurring intrusive thoughts about the death, one can, in a controlled fashion, recall the lost one without focusing on the death event. The degree of control in coping with a traumatic event is very important in determining how destructive the event becomes over time.

YOUR QUESTIONS, continued

How long should grieving last?

While grief is normal, persisting grief reactions are not. In the same way that a persisting acute reaction to trauma can signify major problems, so can persisting grief reactions. If the symptoms listed above last for six months or longer, or if the symptoms interfere with any aspect of functioning, they need to be addressed. If the child is in therapy, caregivers should communicate this with her therapist. You can also let the child's caregivers know whether school performance has been affected. Watch for changes in patterns of play and loss of interest in activities. Be observant. Be patient. Be tolerant. Be sympathetic. These children have been hurt and are in continuing pain.

Should I be concerned when a child says she hears her deceased father's voice?

Expect unusual "sensory" experiences. During the first six months following the loss, children (and adults) will often experience unusual visual, auditory, or tactile sensations. A child may think she hears her dead mother's voice in the next room; she may catch a glimpse of her mother in a crowded mall; out of the corner of her eye, the child may catch mother's reflection in a window. At bedtime or upon waking, these misperceptions are more common. They may be disturbing to parents, caregivers, and the child. Reassure the child. These 'visions' are often interpreted in context of a religious belief system — "Mommy came back to tell me it was okay; she is still with me." This can be important for the child, and there is no reason to undermine these feelings. These "hysterical materializations" are common, and often mislabeled as visual or auditory "hallucinations." If you have questions about these symptoms, discuss them with an experienced mental health professional or physician. It may also be helpful to speak directly with the child's caregivers about what is happening.

Do children understand events accurately?

Young children often make false assumptions about the causes of major events. Unfortunately these assumptions may include some sense that they were at fault for the event — including the death of a loved one. Adults often assume that causality is clear: someone dies in a car accident, is killed in a drive-by shooting, or dies in a fire. The child, however, may very easily distort an event, and come to the wrong conclusions about causality. "Mom died in the car accident because she was coming to get me at school. The other driver was mad at her;" "My brother is dead because he was helping me with my homework. The person that shot my brother was really shooting at me, and hit my brother because he was in my room." "The fire was God's way of punishing (or making an example of) my family." In many of these distorted explanations, children assume some degree of responsibility for the death. This can lead to very destructive and inappropriate feelings of guilt. Try to correct any misperceptions immediately. And be prepared to correct these false, destructive ideas again and again.

Be clear. Explore the child's evolving sense of causality. Correct and clarify as you see false reasoning develop. Over time, the ability of the child to cope is related to the ability of the child to understand. While some elements of death and tragedy will always remain beyond understanding, explain this to the child: "I don't know, some things we can never really understand." If the child feels that they share the unknown and unknowable with an adult, they feel safer. Don't let the child develop a sense that there is a secret about the event — this can be very destructive. Let the child know that adults cannot and will not understand some things either.

What can I do to help?

In summary, there are a number of important things you can do as a prominent figure in a child's life to help him cope with the loss he has suffered.

1. Be honest, open and clear. Whenever possible, adults should give children the facts regarding the death. While there is no need to describe great lingering detail, the important details should be given. These may be horrifying, but it is always important to give factual information to the child. The imagination of a child will "fill in" the details if they are not given. Too often, these imagined details are distorted, inaccurate, and more horrifying than the actual details, and can ultimately interfere with the long-term healing process.

2. Do not avoid the topic when the child brings it up. Similar to other trauma, the adults around the child need to be available when the child wants to talk, but should avoid probing when the child does not want to talk. This may mean answering one question, or struggling with a very difficult question. "Does it hurt when you burn to death?" Don't be surprised if in the middle of your struggle for the "right" answer, the child returns to play and acts disinterested. The child has been unable to tolerate the level of emotional intensity and is coping with it by avoiding it at that point.

Children will sense if the topic is emotionally difficult for adults around them. A child will try to please adults by either avoiding emotional topics or persisting with topics that she senses they find more pleasant. Try to gauge your own sense of discomfort and directly address this with the child. It is reassuring to children that they are not alone in some of their emotional upset.

Children look to adults to understand and interpret their own inner states. Younger children will even mirror the nature and intensity of an adult's emotions. So if you feel you will be unable to control your emotions when you are trying to help the child, you will need to use some coping strategies yourself. Take a few moments, collect yourself, and then try to help the child. It is only human to lose control and be very emotional in these moments. After you feel more composed, you can help the child understand how you were overcome with emotion, "Just like you feel sometimes." Explain that you struggle to understand too — that "We need to help each other when we are sad."

3. Be prepared to discuss the same details again and again. Expect to hear things from the child that seem as if they didn't "hear" you when you told them the first time. The powerful, pervasive implications of death for the child can be overwhelming indeed. The child's responses to death of a parent, sibling, or other loved one will be similar to the child's responses to other traumatic events. This will include emotional numbing, avoidance, sadness, regression, episodic manifestations of anger, frustration, fear of the unknown (e.g., the future), helplessness, and confusion.

The child will have recurring, intrusive, and emotionally evocative recollections of the loved one, and about the death of the loved one. If there is no clear image of the death, the child will imagine various scenarios. These images will return over and over again. As they do, the child (if she feels safe and supported by the adults around her) will ask about death, the specifics of the death, and the loved one. Patiently, repeat clear, honest facts for the child. If you don't

know something — or if you also have wondered about the nature of death or a detail in this specific loss — tell the child. Help the child explore possible explanations, and help the child understand that you and others can and do live with many unknowns. In this process, let the child know, however, that there are things we do know — things we can understand. Bring positive memories, images, and recollections of the loved one into the conversation.

4. Be available, nurturing, reassuring, and predictable. All of these things make the child's work easier. The child will feel safe and cared for. The loss of parents, siblings and other loved ones is extremely traumatic, and will forever change this child's life. The child has, in some sense, a lifelong task of working, re-working — experiencing and re-experiencing — the loss of these loved ones. Each holiday, each family occasion, will bring the loss, the death, and the ghost of the loved one to this child. Available, nurturing, and caring caregivers, teachers, therapists, and caseworkers will all make this journey easier.

5. Understand that surviving children often feel guilty. A child surviving when family members die may often feel guilty. This can be a very destructive and pervasive belief. The guilt children feel is related to the false assumptions they make about the event. An important principle in this process is that children do not know how to verbalize or express guilt in the same fashion as adults. Guilt, as expressed by children, may often be best observed in behaviors and emotions that are related to self-hatred and self-destruction. The child will not likely be able to articulate that survivor guilt is intimately related to their sense of worthlessness or self-abusive/ destructive behaviors.

The children surviving a parent's sudden death will have great survivor guilt. "Was there something wrong or bad about me? I could have been there — I should have been there." These thoughts will recur in any variety of permutations. And most of the time, the outcome of these thoughts will be guilt. If these children's caregivers, teachers, and therapists can minimize these potentially escalating and destructive ideas, the child's recovery will be eased.

6. Take advantage of other resources. There are many other well-trained professionals willing to help you and the child in your care with these problems. Take advantage of them. Always remember that the loss does not go away, but the way children experience loss will change with time, hopefully maturing in ways that make it easier to bear. The traumatic loss of a parent, a sibling, and a peer will always be with these children. With time, love, and understanding, however, children can learn to carry the burdens of traumatic loss in ways that will not interfere with their healthy development.

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Written by siblings and for siblings,
But also for parents and everyone else who
Wants to know how to support a bereaved sibling.

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Additional Information

Here are a few extra salient points made by Lauren Schneider, MSW in her book, Children Grieve, Too (found on our website).

Lauren Schneider states, [Remember that,] "while your children may consider themselves 'all grown up,' they are in fact still developing physically, cognitively, and emotionally well into their 20s. It is appropriate that you use age appropriate language when speaking to your children about death. Be mindful that children cannot tolerate intense emotions or focus their attention for as long as you can."

1) Be honest with your child. Explain what has happened in direct, age appropriate language without using euphemisms like "passed away," "lost," "went to sleep" "God needed him." These types of explanations often lead to other fears. For instance, if you say your child died in his sleep or went to sleep forever, your child may become terrified of going to sleep and start having sleep disturbances. Also, people do not die because they were "sick." People die due to a specific medical problem, accident, or other cause. Telling a child his brother died because he was sick will make him fearful whenever anyone else gets sick. Here is one thing you can say, "The doctors gave your brother lots of medicine and treatments to try and help him get better, but there weren't any that would make his cancer go away and his body stopped working and he died." "Your brother was crossing the street and a car hit him. His body was hurt so badly that the paramedics and doctors could not fix him and he died." "Your sister's heart wasn't working properly and it stopped beating and she died."

2) Involve your children in mourning rituals, such as creating some process of the service, helping to carry the casket, singing, or speaking at the service. Some people are reluctant to involve their children for fear it will frighten them and/or detract from their positive memories. Current understandings of grief suggest that children derive the same benefits as adults when they participate in mourning rituals.

3) Within a period of time, everyone has gone home, phone calls slow down, and people stop visiting. The way you and the children operate during the first weeks after the death will set the stage for the future. Get back to routines where there is familiarity. Create an atmosphere for supporting one another when the inevitable waves of grief wash over you. You an cry in front of your children. Just say, "I'm really sad right now about your brother and missing him." At the same time model for your children that, in spite of your grief, life continues, and it's okay to take breaks and engage in social and other life enhancing activities.

Here are a few more from Lauren's book. You will find the details there.

4) Get support for yourself.
5) Be a role model for how people grieve.
6) Remember that your children are children and not your life partner or confidant.
7) Practice tolerating your children's grief.
8) Teach your children ways they can comfort themselves.