

# Parenting the Surviving Siblings



## Learning Objectives

**After reading this Guide, you will be able to:**

- Understand how the surviving siblings may be experiencing grief
- Recognize natural responses to grief in children
- Support the surviving children, including talking with them about death and loss

## Introduction

Every individual, including children, experiences loss in their own way. Research\* has shown that despite seemingly overwhelming grief and the lifelong impact of loss, each of us has the capacity to integrate the loss over time, and that children are very resilient. Research has also shown that how well parents cope with the loss of a child has a direct correlation to how well their other children will fare over time.

Parents understandably feel the burden of managing the normal responsibilities of parenting, helping their surviving children manage grief, and at the same time processing their own grief. For some parents, there is extreme fear that something will happen to one of the surviving children. Some report that their grief is so overwhelming that they feel unable to give the siblings the attention they need. Getting support for themselves helps the parents and helps them support their children.

## How Children Understand Death

Life experiences, losses in the past, and other exposure to death may influence a child's understanding of death, but generally their understanding follows these developmental stages.

- **Infants have no cognitive understanding of death, but they do grieve.** They may experience death as separation, aware that someone else is feeding or holding them. They often sense a caregiver's emotional state, so it is important to maintain routines and avoid separation when possible.

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- **Preschool (ages 2-5) children see death as temporary and reversible, as in cartoons.** Magical thinking (around age 5 yrs.) is characteristic, and so preschoolers may believe that a death is the result of something they did or didn't do, or that they somehow had the power to cause the death. (Magical thinking is something that can continue into adulthood.)
- **Children ages 6-9 are concrete thinkers but still do not understand that death is permanent.** They still may believe it will never happen to them or anyone they know.
- **Children ages 9-11 remain concrete thinkers.** They have some capacity to put themselves in other people's shoes and may have a sense that others can die. They are often very interested in facts and more "scientific" information. As such, they may show less emotion, but be very inquisitive about how the death occurred and the details of the type of death. It does not mean they are not sad or grieving, simply that their form of meaning-making is different.
- **Around age 12, children begin to have abstract thinking and come to understand that death is final, irreversible, and will happen to everyone.** There are so many other factors during adolescence that are important to consider, including role changes within the family, self-consciousness about having a sibling die, and expectations from family members now that one child isn't there to fulfill some of these. Adolescence also has many phases, and each phase may bring with it different responses. It can sometimes be helpful to have a trusted family member, or another adult be "responsible" for the support of a sibling, especially in the beginning. However, it is also important that the surviving children not feel abandoned, left to the care of someone else, or that their parents are unable to care for them.

## Talking with Children about Death

Regardless of their age, helping a child understand what has happened requires direct, accurate and age-appropriate information from parents or other caregivers.

- **Be prepared to talk to children of different ages in different ways.** You may find yourself having to answer many difficult and painful questions, about this specific death and about death in general. Younger children, especially, are curious and will try to understand what has happened and what it means. They may ask questions repeatedly. They are trying to make meaning and to master their understanding. An older (teen) sibling may want to know more facts or not talk at all. One child may want to participate in rituals, and another may want to find their own. They may have formed ideas about death and an afterlife. Reassuring them of your willingness to talk or to let them find their own expression is key. It may be months or years after the death before you learn how the sibling death affected your surviving children.

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- **Use honest and age-appropriate language.** There are no special words to use when talking with your child about death, but the tone and language you use are important. As much as possible, children should be told about the death of their sibling in familiar surroundings, gently, and with love and affection. Using words like “dead” and “died” helps avoid confusion, as many other terms (e.g., passed on, resting in peace, departed) have multiple meanings. This is particularly true for young children, who tend to be concrete thinkers and take things quite literally.
- **Answer questions carefully, but directly.** Siblings will likely have questions about what happened, what it means, and what will happen next. Be honest and direct, or a child’s imagination may take over. The kinds of questions and how often they ask may be directly connected to their age and, importantly, to their developmental stage.
- **Start by clarifying what they know and what information they are asking for, using language like “Tell me what you think.** Tell me what you are wondering/worried about.” Answer with simple language: “Died or dead means the person is not living anymore. Their body stopped working.” Or “Died means they cannot talk, breathe, walk, move, eat or do any of the things that they could do when they were alive.”
- **Be thoughtful about the images you choose.** Young children can be very literal. Sometimes our words can be frightening or confusing. Children wonder: “If heaven is up in the sky, 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 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. A young child who is told that the sibling is “in the trees and flowers” may expect to find the sibling in those places. It is preferable to suggest that we can remember the child by thinking of things we have done with them or looking at pictures.
- **If you have religious beliefs that help explain what happens when somebody dies, you may wish to share them with your child.** Be prepared for further questions. It’s often more helpful to answer a child’s questions about death with, “No one knows for certain, but I believe (or ‘in our family we believe’) that...” Saying, “I wonder about that, too,” and asking a child what they believe is a way of keeping the communication and connection open.
- **Let your children know it’s okay to talk about death.** Death is an inescapable part of life. Through your conversations with your child, you will discover what they know and do not know, and discover any misconceptions, fears or worries they may have. Also remember that it may be helpful to use books, art, movement and/or music as a way for children to express questions and feelings. You may wish to seek additional support for your child(ren), as they may worry about sharing their feelings for fear of further upsetting their parents.

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CPN's Guide "Helping Children Cope with a Sibling's Serious Illness" offers other helpful tips for how to speak with siblings.

<https://courageousparentsnetwork.org/guides/helping-children-cope-with-a-siblings-serious-illness/>

## Grief: What is Typical for a Child?

The parent of a child whose sibling has died naturally worries about how well their living child is handling the loss, and wonders whether what the child is doing, feeling, and thinking is normal. It is common for children to move back and forth frequently, even in a single hour or day, between expressions of grief and their more typical, light-hearted play. 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 parents' attention.) They may ask a few questions and then go immediately back to playing. Or, one minute they are crying or missing the sibling and the next minute they want a snack. This back and forth can be challenging, but expressions of grief can come in waves and may not be constant or for any specific period of time.

## What Surviving Siblings Might be Feeling

Losing their sibling has changed the survivor's sense of order and what is "right." They may feel out of balance and respond with anger. The anger may be revealed in boisterous play, nightmares, irritability, or a variety of other behaviors. Logical or not, they may direct the anger at someone they blame for the death. Other common feelings and behaviors of surviving siblings may include:

- Worry that they don't measure up to the child who died
- Fear that they will get sick and die, too
- Sensing their parents' inability to be emotionally present and so not asking for attention
- Withdrawing, or trying to be extra-good at things to fill the space of the deceased child, so as not to burden the parents
- Avoiding talking about the death of their sibling, wanting to be a "regular kid"
- Having their own feelings of grief that often change over time
- Sharing their thoughts with friends or other trusted adults

## Possible Signs of Grief

There are some common themes and experiences that are helpful to know about and to be watchful for. If any symptom seems very unusual or concerning, consult your pediatrician or therapist.

- Complaining of physical symptoms (headache/stomachache)
- Frequently going to the nurse at school
- Repeatedly telling, or asking, how the person died

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- Avoiding talking about the person or the death
- Expressing feelings of guilt or helplessness; wishing to have done something to prevent the death
- Dreaming about the death, having nightmares about the person and death details
- Having trouble sleeping/being afraid to go to sleep/wanting to sleep a lot
- Feeling sad and crying more than usual
- Feeling angry, confused, frustrated, and/or quick to lash out
- Exhibiting separation anxiety, not wanting to be away from parents or afraid to be alone and/or stay home alone
- Withdrawing from friends or not wanting to go out as much
- Wanting to be with the person who died, or their things
- Finding it difficult to concentrate on work or school
- Over-performing in school and at home, trying to be perfect
- Worrying about which loved one might die next

As children mature and process grief, they are likely to display their feelings of sadness on and off over a long period of time, and often at unexpected moments. Sometimes an event that may seem unrelated to the loss of their sibling can trigger new feelings of sadness and unexpected behaviors. It is crucial to understand these behaviors in the context of grief: your child may not be being “bad,” but rather is mourning the loss of their sibling. 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.

## Helping Children Express Their Feelings: With You and With the Help of Others

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 their parents further. Allowing them to express difficult feelings, in their own time and way, is one of the most helpful ways to help children process their loss. You help your child not only when you talk with them, but also when you offer them other safe places or ways in which to express their feelings. Older children may choose creative expression (writing, music, movement, etc.), talk to peers, or talk with another trusted adult.

You also help your child when you find support for yourself. It is very difficult to take care of your family if you are not aware of, and addressing, your own needs. Children will watch their parents carefully to see how they are coping. Modeling healthy coping strategies is important as your children work out their own emotions and develop their own ability to cope. Tending to your personal relationships, especially your marriage or parenting partnership if you have one, demonstrates the importance of being and working together. Talking about the many ways in which people grieve,

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and the multiple mechanisms available to support a person in grief, can be empowering for the whole family. Sharing the tools and support that are helpful to you as a parent gives your children ideas and permission to seek support for themselves.

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

- Speaking one-on-one (or as a couple) with a grief counselor, psychologist, social worker or clergy person. The counselor may also suggest family therapy, depending on the concerns that you discuss.
- Participating 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, movement, and art depending on their developmental stage
- Being with other parents who are also facing the unique challenges of raising grieving children, whether in person or virtually, can be a wonderful support

## Conclusion

Making a safe place for hard conversations and getting support for members of your family to have these conversations is an important way to help your children integrate the death of their sibling into the family story. When you model openness and compassion, you will be showing your children that it is safe to talk about sadness, anger and other difficult topics, and get support as you and they process grief. These life lessons, as difficult as they are, will help everyone and provide a solid ground for coping with future losses.

## Resources for Families



### Books

CPN maintains a list of books that may help as you support your family in grief.

<https://courageousparentsnetwork.org/guides/bereavement-bibliography-2>



### Website

Additional resources to support siblings can be found at The Dougy Center.

<https://www.dougy.org>

*\*American Association for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry newsletter, July 2004*

*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 Association for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry newsletter, July 2004*