



Caring for Surviving Children

The death of a child strikes at the very heart of a family. Bereaved parents often feel helpless to provide guidance and comfort to their surviving children, yet must parent at a time when their emotional and physical resources are severely stressed. Children are frequently referred to as the “forgotten mourners” because the attention of family members and friends is directed toward the parents.

Although surviving children have feelings of grief similar to those of an adult, they often express those feelings differently because they are young and do not have the same coping abilities as adults. They may seem outwardly confused and defensive, and unwilling to share their grief with their parents, preferring to depend upon their peer group or others for support.

A surviving child is reacting to the loss of a sibling and to the changed behavior and interaction of parents and others who are close. Reassure your children that the depth of grief you are feeling does not lessen your love for them.

The following suggestions come from bereaved parents, surviving children, and professionals to assist bereaved parents in understanding and meeting the needs of their surviving children.

The Age of Surviving Children

It is important to be aware of your child’s level of understanding as it relates to the death of a sibling: 0–6 months old—has no conception of death, but may respond to parental reactions to the loss; 6–18 months old—possesses the early beginnings of grief and mourning, but perceives death as temporary; 18

months to 5 years old—continues to see grief as temporary, with difficulty understanding the permanence—needs concrete explanations of what death means; 6–8 years old—understands the sibling will not return and death is universal (it could happen to me); 9–12 years old—understands the reality of death and is curious about biological aspects of death and details of the burial; 13 years and older—fully understands the concept of death.

Explain truthfully to your children, on a level they can understand, what caused the death of a sibling. Answer questions simply and directly, giving answers to build on later as the child ages.

Explaining the Concept of Death

To avoid fear in a younger sibling that he or she may also die, explain that there are three reasons why a person will die: That person is very, very, very sick; that person is very, very, very hurt; that person is very, very, very old.

Avoid euphemisms that can be easily misunderstood by children: the sibling who died is not asleep; God did not come to take the sibling to heaven; the child was not “called home.” Oftentimes religious sentiments intended to comfort children can be misinterpreted, causing confusion.

The Sibling Relationship

Your surviving children had a close relationship with their sibling who died, but there were times of great love and there were times of great anger. Children often feel guilty about these times of anger and may even feel that in some way this caused their sibling’s death. Reassure your children that they were loved by their sibling and did not cause the death.

Parental Role Modeling

Children learn how to express grief by observing their parents’ mourning process. Therefore, it is important that parents acknowledge their child’s death, display appropriate emotions, and give their surviving children permission to do so as well. While you should not be afraid to show an appropriate level of emotion in front of and with your surviving children, you need to reassure them that although you are grieving, you will still be able to take care of them. If they can see the extent of your grief, this will confirm their own feelings, that it is okay for them to cry, be sad, show anger, and even laugh.

Parents often idealize their child who died, causing siblings to feel they can never live up to the standard of love lavished upon their sibling’s memory. Parents should take care not to make comparisons with surviving children that could lead to feelings of unworthiness, even to the point where surviving children might feel the parents wish they had died instead. Reinforce the positive things your surviving children do. Spend quality time with them.

While it is difficult, parents must tread a fine line not to be overprotective or over permissive. Routines should be continued whenever possible.

Many children find it difficult to talk openly about their feelings with their parents. This does not mean they do not want your input. When your children do open up to you, if even briefly, listen carefully to what is said and the concerns that are voiced. When your children open up to you, try your best not to judge or criticize but rather to validate their feelings. These will be the moments when you have the opportunity to gain their confidence and let them know that you support them in their unique grief journey.

Children often find it easier to “mourn at a distance”—to show little emotion at a sibling’s death, only to mourn in private away from other people. Tears may still appear at the most unexpected times. Use these openings to support them in their grief and acknowledge how difficult it must be for them to lose their sibling.

Plan a memorial celebration in which your surviving children can participate, making them feel a part of the family’s grieving process.

Some Typical Reactions

Younger children may at first make jokes or continue normal play as a distraction. This is not abnormal nor reason for concern.

For those a little older, it's okay:

- To cry and feel depressed. They've lost a great deal.
- To copy some of their brother's or sister's habits and interests, while still being themselves.
- To live “in the past” for a while to keep alive the memories.
- To forgive themselves for fights, arguments, and mean things they said or did to their brother or sister.
- To go on living.

However, watch for destructive reactions:

- Use of drugs or alcohol.
- Acting out of frustrations through reckless driving or skipping school.
- Doing things out of anger to hurt others because of the pain they themselves are feeling.
- Experimenting with sex just to feel close to someone.
- Discontinuing activities that meant so much to them.
- References to suicide.

Children of all ages sometimes temporarily regress emotionally and developmentally. They may throw tantrums, have difficulty concentrating, develop a sudden dependency, or exhibit aggressive behaviors. Again, try your best to be patient and loving.

Suggestions for Helping Your Children

Children need parental support and opportunities to be heard, acknowledged, and understood if they are going to successfully work through the grief process.

Share the belongings of the child who died, perhaps giving each surviving sibling something “for the moment” and something to put away for adulthood like a photograph, favorite book, CD, or piece of jewelry.

Help your children to channel their grief into positive activities such as drawing, writing in a journal or diary, and reading. Seek their advice in ways they may want to memorialize their sibling such as creating a memorial fund, and help them accomplish these goals.

If you find, after a time, that your children don't seem to be adjusting to their new lives, don't be afraid to encourage them to talk with a qualified school counselor, or a psychologist or psychiatrist who specializes in bereavement.

Support through The Compassionate Friends

Siblings can often receive support through The Compassionate Friends. While some chapters have sibling subgroups where siblings as young as 14 can participate, adult siblings are always welcome to attend meetings where no subgroup is available. Siblings are invited to participate in specific Online Support Community rooms on TCF's national website. Annual TCF National Conferences usually are attended by at least a couple hundred siblings of all ages, and siblings report positive experiences in making new friends who understand their grief. Many siblings are members of The Compassionate Friends/USA Facebook Page. TCF also offers private Facebook groups, some that are specifically for siblings only. They can be found at <https://www.compassionatefriends.org/find-support/online-communities/>. Check TCF's national website, under “Resources,” for the latest information on support available for siblings. You can also request a customized bereavement packet (available at no charge) for surviving siblings by contacting TCF's National Office.

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