

# Our Surviving Children

It has never been easy for children to understand death, and there has never been a right time for parents to try to explain death to their children. These days they seldom meet it in reality, and yet they receive varied and contradictory messages about it.

We must be honest and try not to say anything that the child will later find out to have been untrue, for that could destroy trust. This does not mean that we should overload them with too much information. We need to be able to say "I don't know", and to be comfortable with what we do say: this is not a time for pretence.

If we are to help our surviving children who have experienced the death of a child in our family, we need to consider their understanding of death. As far as possible, we need to use words and concepts which are familiar to each of them. It is helpful if we can accept calmly whatever they say, avoiding judgment and censure, so that it can be talked about and put into the context of family beliefs and attitudes.

## Children's reactions to death

Children, like adults, are individuals. Nevertheless, there are some common patterns in children's development and it can be useful to look at how these influence the way in which our child or children cope with bereavement, including the death of a brother or sister. The ages here are a guide only.

Babies and toddlers are affected by their parents' emotions and by the atmosphere in a home. It is realised now that babies suffer from grief in the long term as well as in the short term through disrupted breast feeding and different cares. Twins especially suffer from the loss of their other half. Young children do not have words yet for their feelings, but they may show distress through weight loss, disturbed sleep patterns or by crying more for no obvious reason. We can help them by making sure they have lots of physical closeness, holding and cuddling, as well as soft words even through tears. We should accept that they may need nursing to sleep, or want to share our bed for a while until our home has weathered the first impact of this family tragedy. In giving such comfort to our little ones, we may indeed find some comfort for ourselves.

Children up to the age of about seven have an attention span different from ours. It can be distressing for parents if, a few minutes into a serious conversation about their dead sibling, their five-year-old says, "Can I go out to play football now?" It can be upsetting to have to go over facts repeatedly, and to know that the same questions will be asked again later, as, for instance, "When is Sally coming home?" Young children can need this repetition because time concepts are hard to grasp and suddenly we find ourselves needing to explain words like 'never' and 'always'.

Play is a way for children to express their feelings and test out their ideas. It can be helpful to them in coming to understand what has happened; they may act out a death with their toys, play at funerals, and get their friends to play games in which killing and dying are central. This is not morbid, but simply a young child's way of trying to make sense of things they have heard or seen. We need to reassure them about many things: many bereaved children become fearful that they may die, or that their parents will suddenly disappear. They may be misled by the phrase 'lost' and try to go in search of their dead brother or sister, or they may become frightened at being 'lost' themselves when out shopping. Whether their sibling died from illness or an accident, children might try to apportion blame just as adults do, especially if they overhear conversations with such thoughts expressed.

Playgroup and school give children not only a chance to express their feelings, but also to keep in touch with the world of 'normal', non-grieving people. Listening to them at home can give us valuable clues to our young child's thoughts and fears, and talking to their playgroup leader or their teacher allows us to share ideas on our worries and possible ways of support. Sometimes children express themselves through drawing, painting or craft work when they cannot find the right words.

Children up to the age of about eleven are more likely to be able to grasp the different aspects of death, and they can begin to have a personal viewpoint about it. They may be interested in the physical details, including questions about burial or cremation. They may well have experienced the loss of an older member of the family, perhaps a grandparent, and been encouraged to share in at least part of the



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family mourning. In spite of this, death can also be seen as a 'monster' that snatches people away, and many disturbing thoughts may result in distress and possibly nightmares.

Older children and young adults face difficult times even without a death in the family. There are conflicting emotions, growth spurts, and imbalance in hormones to cope with at a time when they are beginning to grow away from their family and move towards becoming an independent adult. They may have a more mature grasp of what is happening, but that does not necessarily make it easier for their parents to help. Often siblings feel at ease only with their friends, but these friends may have little experience themselves of bereavement. The death of a brother or sister at their age can be profoundly disturbing. Changes can make them more aware of the meaning of life.

They may feel a responsibility towards us, and think that they should somehow become two people, replacing their brother or sister as well as being themselves. Others have great difficulty with the perceived idealisation of the deceased child, whose virtues are extolled and whose less attractive qualities seem forgotten. Well-meaning family friends often compound the difficulties by saying Be strong or by not asking how they themselves feel, only 'How is your mum (or dad) coping?' The urge to scream "What about me?" can be overwhelming. Good, thoughtful friends with a welcoming home to visit, sympathetic teachers and other caring adults outside the family are invaluable at this time.

Older children may feel that they should look after their younger surviving siblings after the death of a brother or sister, and this can be an important aspect of comfort and help for everyone, including parents. The roles of parents and children can become almost reversed, at least for a while, with a child caring for the parent through both practical and emotional support. It is important that a right balance is aimed for from the start in any such plans. This support for others may be at the expense of coping with their own grief, which is then suppressed, often causing difficulties later.

Acceptable boundaries of behaviour can be hard to establish as children grow older, and this is perhaps more so in a grief-stricken household. We may say that discussion and consensus work better than rules rigidly enforced, or that children can benefit from clear boundaries and sanctions. However, this does not take into account the emotional exhaustion that exists in a bereaved family, where we as parents struggle to get through our days and cannot readily tolerate particularly bad behaviour. We need to try to avoid destructive conversations which can lead to ever deeper conflict and may result in long-term rifts.

## Helping our children to grieve

For us, the death of one of our children is devastating. First reactions are of shock, numbness, disbelief and denial, and these can protect us in some way. If we have surviving children, we are concerned for them and want to shield them from the awful pain and suffering that we already experience. How do we do this? How will we be able to continue to support them through the days ahead and into the future?

We need to share our thoughts and our feelings. We should not exclude our children entirely from our own grief in the mistaken belief that it is bad for them to be upset. They know when adults are keeping secrets, and this can make them feel afraid and insecure. We do not help our children to grieve if they never see us distressed and crying; rather they may wonder if we would shed tears for them if they died. We must reassure our surviving children that we don't stop loving people when they die: they live in our hearts; we continue to talk about them. Our surviving children are missing their brother or sister, who may well have played a big part in their lives. There is now a void in their lives as there is in ours.

If one of our surviving children has learning difficulties, we may have tried to protect them from the harsher things in life. When their brother or sister dies, we may have to suppress this instinct and make sure that they are included fully in the emotions, experiences and grief of our family. We cannot assure them that everything is all right, because it is not. We know our own child, the level of words to use, how we might communicate our feelings and share our thoughts. The worst thing for our children is for them to feel excluded. Grief is such a powerful emotion that it cannot be hidden from those we love, even if their understanding is limited in some way.



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Probably one of the overriding needs, even in the early days of our loss, is to keep the routines going for the child or children: getting through the days can be positive and important. The older children can share in some of the tasks and chores of the household, and there can be school and homework, as well as seeing friends and relatives.

Loneliness is a real problem for a bereaved child, especially if there were two children and now he or she is the only child. This is made harder to bear if they shared a bedroom and are now sleeping alone. If they were close in age, there would perhaps be many things they did together. It is suddenly very different when a constant companion is no longer around, even if there were arguments, squabbles or fighting. Night-time can be really hard. Bedtime routines may be different and bring feelings of isolation from other family members, fears of the dark, and difficulty in getting to sleep with so many thoughts churning around. They may be afraid, too, of dreaming of their brother or sister, and perhaps having nightmares. Practical things can help, like a night-light, some music, leaving the door open, or perhaps staying with them until they fall asleep.

If children have been used to being read to at bedtime, then careful selection of suitable stories should continue. We can enlist the help of friends or relations. Reading may be easier for some people than talking to a grieving child. Books suitable for any one of our children are another way to explore ideas and share thoughts and feelings, and there is often good guidance with regard to the age of the listener or a reader. Picture books, when viewed with discussion, are helpful for the very young. As well as specifically spiritual or religious books, stories from nature can help with regard to death and bereavement. Many children are introduced to poetry, and enjoy and come to value poems as well as prose writing. Our public or a school library gives sound advice on such books.

Doing, making and creating something can be another way of coping with sadness or grief. Some families make a memory book together, and this can be a lasting treasure to be shared at any time in the future, as well as a source of present comfort. Drawings, painting, writings, photographs and possibly newspaper or school magazine cuttings will be triggers for recollection in years to come. Sometimes family members choose to remember their sibling through some sort of fund raising, perhaps through a sporting activity or something that relates to the life of their brother or sister. As parents we want to provide opportunities for our children to express their grief, but we also need to understand that they will do this in their own time and place, not necessarily in ours.

Rest and quiet times are important as well as thinking that we must all keep busy. All bereaved parents know at firsthand how exhausting grief can be and how much we need time to recover. It is the same for our children. Treats and outings, however, should not be forgotten, and these may bring respite just as times of rest can. Simple treats, like playing in a local park, a visit to the cinema for a carefully chosen film, or a day out somewhere selected by the whole family are all possibilities. Friends might like to help with these sorts of events.

Friends are increasingly important in their lives as our children grow older. There is an anxious need to conform to the latest fashion, to listen to the latest music, and these trends move fast. Grieving children may find themselves left behind and isolated by their loss, with few friends who have any experience of death or grief. Some of our surviving children are lucky and receive invaluable support from their friends, and they find them to be a refuge from the atmosphere at home.

Appetite can be variable, at least through the early weeks of a bereavement. It is essential that meals do not become a battleground. Having a meal together can serve a number of purposes: it is a good time to talk, and children claiming not to be hungry will often eat a little. They may enjoy sharing in the planning and preparation of food as another of the creative ways of helping each one of us to cope.

The pressures of exams can be difficult at any time, but are possibly more so when a family is grieving. This will apply not only to the older child and young adult working for major school and college exams that can obviously affect life choices, but also for younger siblings facing tests in school, or taking exams in subjects such as music or dance that they may be studying privately. Concentration, confidence and self esteem may be suffering, motivation affected, and expectations changed. Encouragement and understanding are necessary, together with helpful suggestions, and a deferred exam may be better



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than a failed one. Everyone could benefit from contact and discussion with teachers or college tutors and pastoral staff as a way of getting advice and support.

Leaving home can be especially difficult in the aftermath of bereavement. Parents may find it doubly hard to let go, having already lost one child, and the surviving brother or sister may worry about their parents coping without them. The fears of separation can be eased by talking about how we will keep in touch, and by acknowledging our feelings and sharing them.

## Difficult feelings

We adults all find some feelings more difficult to deal with than others, and children are the same. There is a danger that we will encourage our children to bottle up the ones that are hardest to deal with, when these may be the very ones they need to release.

Anger is a powerful feeling, often frightening in its potential for violence, and children can be worried by the ferocity of their anger. Anger is part of grief and loss and we need to recognise it, and encourage them to express their anger in safe ways. This is not an easy thing to do. Our younger children may exhibit rudeness and uncooperative or aggressive attitudes. Some older children become withdrawn and morose, others noisy and hostile, and they worry us terribly with quite destructive behaviour such as truancy, vandalism and drug or alcohol abuse. It can be difficult to maintain communications, and to tell them that we are trying to understand their pain and we are there for them, when they seem bent on self-destruction. Where their behaviour changes dramatically after a bereavement, children need help and support, not criticism or punishment. This might be sought from a trusted adult who is acceptable to them, or professional guidance may be an answer.

Communication within the family can become a minefield, and sometimes conflict arises between parents. Rows and angry exchanges can frighten younger children and disturb older ones, so this in turn can add to their feelings of anger. It can seem that the whole family is falling apart. We may need to reassure our children that they are loved, even if the relationship between their parents is under threat. We may be able to explain that, although we have obvious problems, we do still love each other. It is our deep grief and our different ways of showing it that cause our stressed and distressed state. We sincerely hope that this will soon pass.

Guilt is another difficult emotion and within our grief it can take many forms. As families we sometimes feel that we should have been able to prevent the death; hindsight can be cruel and can make us blame ourselves in quite unreasonable, irrational ways. Surviving siblings may have felt jealous about the extra attention their sister or brother received while they were ill, or sometimes they may have had a difficult relationship with the child who has died. There may have been only a short-lived quarrel, now regretted.

Children can suffer from 'survivor guilt', thinking that they should not be alive when their sibling has died. As parents, we do not want our children to be affected in these ways, and everyone needs reassurances to help allay feelings of remorse, anxiety and guilt. As time goes by, surviving children can worry and feel guilty about forgetting their brother or sister for a while, not even remembering clearly their appearance or their voice. Our younger children can be quite shocked by such discoveries. Older sons and daughters perhaps hold back from regular references, not only because of their own feelings of loss, but also because they worry about upsetting their parents again. Talking to other bereaved siblings can be a great help, not only immediately after a death, but also at any time in the future.

As parents, we continue to remember and mourn our deceased son or daughter for the rest of our lives. It is important that we continue to talk about it in the family. Many of us feel profound concern that we were too disabled by our own grief to see and respond to our other children. It is never too late to say "I'm sorry, I didn't understand." For younger children, this sharing is important as they mature; we can explain why things happened, and have a chance to correct any misunderstandings or gaps in their factual knowledge of events. Healing is an ongoing process and we should take some comfort from our family's apparent survival.

