

Supporting Grieving Siblings

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From The Dougy Center: The National Center of Grieving Children and Families

The death of a brother or sister is often defined as a before-and-after experience in childhood. A sibling's death will change a child's life forever. In the face of the upheaval that often follows a death, it can be overwhelming to know how to help your child or teen in the days, months, and years afterwards. Here are some suggestions.

Communicate Openly

Be honest

One of the first questions people ask after a death is, "How do I tell my children?" ***Start with a short, simple explanation about the death, in language they can understand, and then let their questions guide what else to share.*** With younger children it might sound like this: "Your sister Michelle died. This means her body stopped working and the doctors weren't able to fix it." Avoid euphemisms such as *passed away, went to sleep, crossed over, or lost*, as they can confuse children. For older children or teens, you might say something like this: "Honey, I have terrible news, Jack was hit and killed by a car when he was biking home from Scott's." Even though it can be hard to think about saying these words, know that being honest and open is a great first step in helping grieving children and teens. It minimizes the confusion that comes from misinformation and also keeps children and teens from having to use their limited energy and inner resources trying to figure out what happened.

Repeat

Don't be surprised if younger children ask repeated questions about the person or the death. Young children often don't understand that death is permanent and will ask questions like, "I know Katy died, but will we see her for dinner?" or, "I know Shaquille's in heaven, but will he come home soon?" This doesn't mean you did a bad job of explaining, it's just their way of trying to make sense of what happened. You can help by repeating the same simple and honest explanation you gave about death. Here's an example: "Honey, remember when I told you that Katy died and her body stopped working? That means we won't see her at dinner, but if you want, we can look at pictures of her when we get home." It can be painful to have to repeat the story again and again, but know that by doing so you are helping children to understand.

Listen

When a child is grieving, people can be quick to offer advice, give opinions, and make judgments. ***What's most helpful is to listen without judging, interpreting, or evaluating.*** Sometimes the best response is to say back what you heard without adding reassurance or opinions: "You really miss your sister, especially on the bus ride to school." Listening to children and teens, without trying to fix anything or make it better, is one of the best ways to help them feel heard and supported. Once children and teens trust that you will listen and understand, they'll be more likely to come to you when hurting or needing advice.

Acknowledge Differences.

The roles that people have in their families often change after a death. Family members can be unsure about their responsibilities and feel pressure (from themselves or others) to fill in for the absence of the person who died. ***It's helpful for adults to reassure children that they are not responsible for replacing their sibling in the family dynamic.*** If the child who died always brought humor to family gatherings, start by acknowledging how things might feel without them there, and remind siblings that they aren't expected to fill in as the comedian. Some children or teens may want to carry on the roles of their siblings; it's important for this to be a choice, and not something they think they have to do to keep the family going.

Honor Uniqueness

Celebrate Their Individuality

Grieving children and teens can sometimes feel like they grow up in the shadow of the sibling who died. There can be pressure (real or imagined) to do as well as their sibling or to not make the same mistakes. The comparisons can be subtle and seemingly positive, such as a teacher saying, "You remind me so much of your brother: I bet you're going to be as great in school as he was." They can also be shaming: "You better make good choices, or you're going to end up just like your sister." Some children and teens experience survivor guilt and feel as though the family would have been better off if they were the one who died instead of their sibling.

You can help children and teens by celebrating their individuality which includes their unique contributions to the family, and growing up without the pressure to make up for the loss of their sibling.

Recognize the Uniqueness of Connections

It's important to recognize that the relationship each person in the family had with the child or teen who died is distinct. The connection a sister had with her brother might have elements that are very different from the relationships she had with her parents, or with another sibling. No two people have exactly the same relationship; there are differing aspects of each relationship that make it unique. These include both positive and negative aspects. Create space for children and teens to talk about what was special about the bond they had with their sibling. Allow children and teens to participate in decisions about ways to honor the sibling who died, or other important rituals such as what to do on the death anniversary or their sibling's birthday, whether and when to visit a gravesite, and how to keep the memory of the sibling alive.

Meet Children and Teens with Acceptance

Grievors of all ages tend to be hard on themselves, whether for crying, not crying, being strong, being a mess, thinking about the person, or not thinking about the person. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, just individual and unique responses. Children can grieve very differently from adults and from one another. Even within the same family, one child might want to keep pictures of his brother out, while his sister prefers to have photos in a drawer in her room. You can help children and teens (and yourself) by letting them know that all of their thoughts and feelings are okay. Allowing children and teens to grieve in their own ways reinforces that there are many ways to respond, and that it's okay to find what works best for them.

Remember That Children are Still Children

When a child or teen dies, it's common for adults to grow more protective and concerned about the health and success of other children or teens in the family. For grieving sibling, this additional concern can feel overwhelming. It's important to allow grieving siblings the chance to still be children. This means giving them the space to make mistakes and have freedoms that other children have. Some children or teens will feel pressure, whether from others or themselves. To take care of younger siblings or even their parents.

Give Options

Offer Choices

Children and teens appreciate being able to make choices as much as adults do. The death of a sibling can leave children and teens feeling powerless and out of control. Giving them choices can help them regain a sense of power and trust. The memorial service is a good example of a situation where it's helpful to give children and teens choices. You might give your child or teen the option whether to attend, where to sit, what to wear, or how to participate. Children and teens might have ideas for what flowers, music, and readings to use, or other ways they want to be involved.

Provide Outlets for Expression

While some children and teens will talk about their experiences, many will express themselves through art, writing, music, or creative play. Get out the crayons, paper, markers, paint, clay, and other art materials. You can offer ideas such as making a card for their sibling, creating a collage of pictures, or writing a letter, but be open to their ideas and suggestions for projects. It's helpful to ask children if they want to share what they created with you, and to respect a "no" answer. Some children will be more drawn to physical activity than creative expression, so be sure to create time and space for them to engage in big energy play like running outside, sports, or messy creative projects.

Take Care of Yourself

Find Sources of Support for Yourself.

If you are parenting a grieving child or teen, one of the best ways to help your children is to ensure that you are taking care of yourself. Find good sources of support. Research shows us that how well a child does after the death of someone in the family is linked to how well the adults in their lives are doing. This doesn't mean hiding your grief from your child. Rather, it means ensuring that you have people and activities in your life that are sources of comfort and inspiration. By accessing support, you model for your children ways to take care of themselves, and you reassure them that you will have the energy and presence to be there for them.