

# SUPPORTING SIBLINGS WHEN THEIR BROTHER OR SISTER DIES

Every family is unique, with its own values, culture, behaviours and traditions. The death of a child, whether as a baby or later in life, impacts on different families in different ways.

The death of someone special and ever present in a child's life can be very difficult to process. Brothers and sisters experience a range of sometimes conflicting feelings towards each other. They may love and look up to their sibling, they may feel responsible for their sibling, they may love spending time together and playing with their sibling, they may resent and get angry with their sibling – and often a combination of all of these.

The notion of sibling rivalry is well documented, and the intensity of the sibling relationship can make sibling bereavement extremely distressing.

When a sibling dies, it's common for the surviving brothers and sisters to feel a range of complex and at times overwhelming feelings, rooted in the complexity of their relationship with their dead sibling, and the extremes of their feelings towards them.

This information sheet focuses on supporting siblings when their brother or sister dies. Whilst recognising that there is no right or wrong way to cope with grief, family units may find it helpful to focus on some key issues as they grieve:

- How parents and carers can communicate with bereaved siblings
- How parents and carers can involve bereaved siblings in arrangements and decisions
- How parents and carers can provide longer term support to bereaved siblings

## Be honest

As far as possible, and within reason, and even though it can be very painful, it's usually best to be honest with surviving siblings. Remember – your children will know that something momentous has happened in the family.

To talk about the death and to answer questions truthfully can help to empower children when they are feeling disempowered and out of control.

If the surviving siblings are very young, they can take things that are said to them very literally. Avoid phrases like 'went to sleep' or 'went away' or 'lost', as these can be confusing.

Parents and carers might want to 'practice' what they are going to say, and what words they might use, with someone they trust in advance.



## Follow your child's pace

It's important as far as possible to let the bereaved sibling be the guide for the grownups around them as they navigate their grieving process.

Some surviving siblings will want to talk lots about their deceased brother or sister; others will want to talk very little. It's important to try not to force either way.

Parents or carers can let their child know they are available when and if they are ready to talk.

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## Follow your child's pace (continued)

Every child experiences grief differently, and sometimes their responses can seem strange in the face of grief. We might expect crying and upset, but instead see anger and fear.

Some children experience strong physical symptoms in response to the death of a brother or sister – symptoms such as headaches, stomach aches, sleeplessness, loss of appetite.

Children can swing wildly between varying moods and symptoms, crying one minute and then wanting to go out to play the next. All of this is normal. Children's moods fluctuate under normal circumstances and this can be heightened in grief.

In some situations, children will become very anxious about the prospect of other loved ones dying. They may worry unduly about illness in their parents and carers or in themselves.

Children can become very anxious when apart from their parents and carers, and it's helpful to know that extra physical affection and maintaining a routine and stability can be nurturing to them when their world has changed so dramatically.

## Understanding survivor's guilt

As a sibling grapples with their own grief, plus is witness to the grief of the family and the community around them, they can experience guilt and shame at still being alive. They can question if it would have been better if they had died instead of their brother or sister. This doesn't always happen by any means, but nor is it uncommon.

The important thing is to acknowledge that this guilt feels real for the child, whilst at the same time correcting inaccuracies and misinformation.

The child needs reassurance that he or she is just as important and loved as the sibling who died, and that every child has a slightly different role within the family unit. Their role is no more or less important than their sibling, and in the face of the grief that your family is facing, you love them very much.

Continuing to provide love and reassurance is one of the most important things that a parent or carer can do for a bereaved sibling.



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## Regrets

Surviving siblings may express regrets or remorse about things they did or said to the sibling who died. They may feel guilty about any negative feelings they had towards their brother or sister, and regret arguments, fights and missed opportunities to be in a close and loving relationship.

Of course the truth is that if we had a 'crystal ball', and knew the outcome of things in advance, we would all probably do things a bit differently.

Bereaved siblings who had fights with their brother or sister (not uncommon!), and may even at times have wished that they didn't have a brother or sister, will then naturally feel bad or even worry that their own thoughts and feelings caused the death.

Reassure them by saying that disagreements and fights are a natural part of all sibling relationships. If a parent or carer has brothers or sisters themselves, they can even use honest examples from their own experience. Be honest about what did cause their sibling's death, so that they are not 'filling in the gaps' in an unhelpful or destructive way. Explain that all family members feel angry or have unkind thoughts at times, but these thoughts and feelings cannot cause someone to die.

Don't dismiss their regrets, as working through them will be helpful in the long term.

## The ongoing influence of the deceased sibling

For some children, ongoing connections with their deceased sibling can be very real and very important. This can be comforting in terms of precious memories of time spent together, shared holidays, Christmas's, birthdays, family events etc. It can also be difficult, as the surviving sibling starts to 'misremember' what their sibling was like and can even feel inadequate when they compare themselves to them.

Families can help by focusing on comforting connections with the sibling who has died, whilst at the same time supporting surviving siblings to appreciate their own strengths and abilities, and their special place within the family unit.

Encourage memories which are a comfort and help the surviving sibling to celebrate the life of their deceased brother or sister. Some families make memory scrapbooks or collages, memory boxes and memory salt jars.



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## The grief of the parent / carer

When a parent or carer faces the very difficult experience of losing a child, they may struggle to process their own grief and this can impact on their surviving child(ren).

The grief of a parent can be frightening for a child, but it can also be positive in that it helps them to feel less alone in their own grief. Evidence suggests that children prefer not to be protected from momentous events within their family.

There is no right or wrong way for a family to cope, but evidence suggests that sharing the grieving process is important.

Parents and carers deserve support themselves so that they are best placed to in turn support their surviving child(ren).

Advice to parents and carers includes:

- Consider getting specialist grief support from a bereavement support charity such as CRUSE
- As far as possible say 'yes' to offers of help from friends and family. You don't have to manage everything on your own and taking the support that is on offer is a sign of strength
- Take care of yourself so that you can take care of your child

## Involving bereaved siblings in arrangements and decisions

It can be helpful to include surviving children in the process that takes place after a sibling has died. Exposing children to sad situations is not in itself a bad thing and can help the family to mourn together with a sense of mutual love and respect for each other's feelings.

Lots happens quite quickly after a death, and it can help to involve surviving siblings in funeral arrangements and family mourning plans (see Balloons Information Sheet 1 – The Funeral).

## Seeking support from outside the family unit for a bereaved sibling

Parents and carers might feel that their child would benefit from support outside of the family unit. This can be very helpful to children, as they may feel inhibited from working through and processing their grief in the family environment. They may feel worried about upsetting their parent or carer; they may feel unable to express their darker thoughts for fear of being judged.

A neutral person to talk to, who isn't directly involved in the bereavement, can create opportunities for children to process grief effectively.

Parents and carers who feel that this type of support might be helpful can contact Balloons to discuss our referral process further.

## Some books to share

Sometimes it helps to share books together. Some suggestions:

- Always my brother by Jean Reagan
- Someone I loved died by Christine Harder Tangvald
- We were going to have a baby, but we had an angel instead by Pat Schwiebert

