

Caring for Surviving Children

When a child dies, the whole family is struck with grief. Parents, struggling with their own pain and shock, may be unable to adequately respond to the feelings of their surviving children. A dead child's siblings are sometimes referred to as "the forgotten mourners". The expression of sibling grief, or the suppression of it, will vary according to the child's age and temperament. Much, too, will depend on their observations of how their parents express their grief.

A surviving sibling may also be grieving an apparent loss of their mother or father who has changed after their child's death and may even seem absent in their own overwhelming grief. Some possible reactions of surviving children are described below, as well as some suggestions for how parents can help their children.

Reactions According to the Age of Siblings

These guidelines may help when attempting to explain the cause of a sibling's death, or even the concept of death itself:

- Although an infant under 6 months will have no understanding of death, the baby may nevertheless feel the absence of the sibling and will be affected by their parents' emotions.
- Infants from 6- to 18-months old perceive death as temporary.
- From 18 months to 5 years old, a child still sees death as temporary and will need

concrete explanations of what death means.

- 6- to 8-year-olds understand their brother or sister will not return and that death can happen to anybody.
- 9- to 12-year-olds understand that death is real, and they may question biological aspects of death and burial processes.
- Children 13 years and older fully understand the concept of death.

When answering a child's questions, bear in mind the level of the child's understanding, and give simple and direct answers that can be built on later as the child matures.

Some Typical Reactions

Younger children may appear unaffected as they continue distracting themselves by playing. They grieve in small doses.

Older children may feel safer crying in private, hiding their tears.

Teens may feel safer sharing their grief with their peers, rather than their parents.

Often children hide their own grief in order to protect their parents.

The surviving sibling may feel that the memory of the child who died is romanticized.

Some may copy their brother's or sister's habits or hobbies, perhaps trying to replace the dead child.

Children may feel guilty for the fights and arguments they had with their dead sibling.

A child may regress temporarily to a younger behaviour, such as throwing tantrums or exhibiting extreme dependency.

School-age children may have trouble concentrating on their schoolwork.

All of the above reactions are natural, and will likely resolve over time, whereas destructive reactions such as turning to drugs, alcohol, reckless driving, or suicidal thinking may require help from a professional counselor.

Some Helpful Suggestions

How parents express their grief will provide role models for surviving children. If a parent hides their grief, the children will feel this is expected of them too. The actions of a parent who can express their grief—cry, talk about it, find ways to cope such as writing, walking, going to a support group or counselor—will provide a positive role model for their surviving children.

Parents will have to try to find a balance between being overprotective or over-permissive with their living children.

If the child is old enough (thirteen-plus) a parent can encourage them to join a support group too. The Compassionate Friends of Canada has a sibling Facebook page they could access, and they can also join an online sibling sharing group.

Check with your child's school regarding support and resources for your child while at school. If the child's grief is ignored, the child may feel isolated.

If signs of depression appear, or destructive behaviour, a child should be referred to a school counselor or a professional counselor who specializes in bereavement.

Older children can help plan memorial celebrations marking their sibling's birthday or death day. These can be occasions when the family mourns together. They may also have ideas on how to memorialize their brother or sister, creating a project that a parent can help the child achieve.

Be wary of idealizing the dead child to such an extent that the living children feel unworthy. In some cases, the surviving child thinks they should have died instead.

Continue to share stories about the child who died, as appropriate. If you never mention their name again, children will feel they must do the same.

A child may fear they too will die, and that, also, is a parent's greatest fear: losing another child. Discussing this fear may help alleviate it and may even provide a bonding moment.



Grief Information Leaflets

The Compassionate Friends of Canada publishes several leaflets on different aspects of grief following the death of a child. They are available for download at no charge from our website www.TCFCanada.net.

Note that the Sibling leaflets were written by and for bereaved siblings.

- *Sibling Grief when a Brother or Sister Dies*
- *Seven Principles for Bereaved Siblings*
- *Sudden Death of a Child*
- *Mourning the Death of a Child*
- *Grief after a Substance-related Death*
- *My Child Died by Suicide*
- *My Child was Murdered*
- *Grieving the Loss of an Adult Child*
- *Grief in the Classroom*
- *When a Grandchild Dies*
- *Grief after a Long-term Illness*
- *Miscarriage, Stillbirth & Neonatal Death*
- *A Child with Special Needs has Died*
- *Seven Principles for Bereaved Parents*
- *Grieving the Death of a Stepchild*
- *How to Help When a Child Dies*

For support in your area contact:

THE COMPASSIONATE FRIENDS OF CANADA



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An international peer-support organization for bereaved parents and their surviving children