

Sibling grief in children



What to say to your child

Breaking news to children of the death of a sibling can be very difficult. Children need to be told about death as openly and honestly as possible to understand their own grief, make the event less fearsome and prevent misunderstandings. Ensure they realise that the death was not their fault and use simple terms, including the words like dead and dying. Be prepared to have to repeat the story several times. This is the child's way of making sense of what happened.



Attending the funeral

It is not always easy to decide whether a child should attend a funeral. However, saying goodbye is very important for children as well as adults and so children should be involved in an appropriate way. The decision to include them at a funeral service should, ideally, be a decision shared with the children, depending on their age and understanding. Explaining what will happen at the funeral or cremation takes some of the fear and mystery away for your child.



Children's understanding of death and their reactions

The age of the children and their cognitive abilities affect the kind of support they need and the ways in which they are likely to express their feelings. Under 5 or 6 a child may not be able to understand that death is permanent, nor that it happens to every living being. Children react to grief in many different ways. They may become anxious about being away from their family for any reason, have difficulty going to sleep and lose their appetite. They may also become restless or disruptive at school.



Help children to express their feelings

Let children know that they can talk to you, relatives, friends and teachers about the death, when they wish to. Continue to offer children time to do this in the days, weeks and months ahead. Help children witness the family sharing their feelings with each other. Understand that children express their grief in a different way to adults.



Use play and stories

Try to find time to play with your child. Arrange some time specifically to be alone and carry out an activity together. Children can express a lot of their feelings through play. There are also a lot of books for children of all ages about death. Reading one of these together can provide an opportunity to share your grief as well as your memories. If this is too painful, there may be a close friend or relative who can get involved.



Returning to school

It is important for the child's school to be informed following bereavement. Schools should learn about the various ways a child may react, so that they can create a supportive

environment when the child returns. Teachers can help by ensuring that all relevant people within the school are informed of the child's circumstances and ensure the child is not overwhelmed by staff or pupils asking endless questions.



Special occasions

There is never a time that a dead person is 'forgotten'. They stay in our minds, sometimes in the background, as long as we live. Certain occasions (i.e. Christmas, Father's Day, Mother's Day or birthdays) are likely to be difficult for bereaved children and trigger painful memories. It is important to give children a choice as to how they might engage in the day and how you might acknowledge this as a family. You can help by collecting photos, for instance, or making a story.



Meeting other bereaved siblings

It's important for children to continue to have opportunities to share their feelings. Contact with other bereaved siblings can reassure your surviving child or children that their experiences are natural and a normal part of grieving. We hold events for bereaved siblings and also for other members of the family each year.



Look after yourself

It is important to remember that you also need to think about yourself. Don't increase your own stress by forcing yourself to do anything you are not ready for. Ask others to help you with your surviving children to enable them as well as yourself, to move forward at your own pace.



Psychological support

There is no date or time by which any person, adult or child should have finished grieving. However, if your child is still experiencing the same intensity of feelings a while after the death of their brother or sister this may indicate extra help and support is needed. However, it is important not to assume that your child needs to see someone. It may be more appropriate for you to seek support and perhaps strengthen your ability to help your child directly.

These organisations might be able to offer further information and support:

<https://www.winstonswish.org/>

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/>

<https://www.griefencounter.org.uk/>

If you would like further advice or to hear about other organisations that can help you, please call our Family Support Line on 01483 230974 or email: familysupport@shootingstar.org.uk