



Supporting children when a sibling has died

A guide for bereaved parents,
families and carers

Supporting children after a sibling has died

We would like to offer you and your family our deepest sympathy at this difficult time. If you have other children, it is important to understand that they will be grieving too. They will need help to understand what has happened and to express their feelings. This leaflet contains advice and ideas that you may find helpful.

It is important to be honest with children. You should tell them that their sibling has died and try to explain what this means in words they understand. Children will usually realise something is wrong. Although you may wish to protect your child by shielding them from painful facts, it is better that you try to be honest. Children who know all the facts are able to process them and this will aid 'normal' grieving.

Children may feel hurt or angry that their sibling has gone, or may feel it happened because of something they said or did. It is important to let children express these feelings but reassure them they are not to blame.

Children will move in and out of their grief. They may be sad and tearful one moment and then playing happily the next. It is important to recognise that this is normal and to try and support them.

After the death of someone close, children often worry that they, or others close to them, could die too. Again, it's important to be honest with children: everyone dies some time, but most people live a long time. It is unusual for a baby or child to die.

Adults often worry about letting children see a sibling who has died or attend the funeral. Every child is different, but if they are going to be present you can help them prepare by explaining what will happen. Younger children might like to draw or write something to be placed in the coffin. You could ask older children for ideas for the funeral, for example a special piece of music or a favourite memory to share.

Let them see that you are upset too. Although you may want to protect them, children will learn how to grieve from those around them. Show them how to be open rather than trying to hide their emotions.

You should try to keep children to their routine. Familiar routines can create a sense of normality that helps them feel safe and secure.

Look through photos with them and share stories about special times: sharing memories can help all the family feel closer and stronger.

Every child is unique and will cope with the death in their own way but the following information gives a general guide to children and young people's understanding of death and grief at different ages and stages:

0-3 year olds

- May not understand death and that it is permanent.
- May be clingy, afraid of separation and being alone.
- May regress in toilet training and have difficulty sleeping.

3-5 year olds

- May be curious and factual; wanting to know where their sibling has gone and why. They may have practical questions like what will happen to their sibling's toys.
- May not believe that death is forever and might ask when their sibling will return.
- Tend to think literally, so it's important to avoid explanations such as 'gone away' or 'gone to sleep' which cause confusion and worry.

6-10 year olds

- Begin to understand that death is permanent.
- Often find the concept of death 'spooky' and may be fascinated by the physical aspects of death and the rituals surrounding it.
- May associate death with being bad. They may even feel guilty for having negative thoughts or behaviours.

10 years to adolescence

- Understand death is permanent and happens to every living thing.
- May regress in behaviour or may try to act more 'grown-up'.

Teenagers

- Their grief may be complicated by the struggles of adolescence.
- May find it hard to ask for support while trying to show the world they are independent.
- May confide in friends or trusted teachers rather than family.
- May engage in risk-taking behaviours as a way of coping with the hard facts of life and death.

Summary - what can help?

- Being open and honest.
- Having their sibling's death acknowledged and spoken about.
- Clear information about what happened and what is going to happen next.
- Support to express their thoughts and feelings.
- Taking part in the funeral or having other ways to say goodbye.
- Knowing they are not to blame for what has happened.
- Having encouragement to remember and share positive memories of their brother or sister.
- Sharing your own feelings.

Further support and information

With acknowledgement and support from family, friends and others around them, most children find ways to live with, through and beyond their grief. However, if their grief is complicated or the circumstances are particularly difficult, specialist support can help.

Your GP or Health Visitor can provide help and advice. Valuable support can also come from friends, family, your child's childminder, nursery or school. There are also several charities which specialise in helping children and young people to cope with bereavement. Details can be found in the *Useful contacts* leaflet.