Supporting Children Who Have Lost A Sibling

After the loss of a sibling, a child will be grieving and may have complex emotions about the loss. Support for grieving children is very important, and knowing that there is a safe adult they can speak to openly about their grief, such as a family member, family friend or school teacher, can help children to understand and express their emotions, and come to terms with their loss. This guide offers information for adults who are supporting children in their grief.

How Children's Grief Differs from Adults'

Children grieve differently from adults, and their grief can manifest in various ways depending on their age, developmental stage, and individual personality.

1. Children often grieve in bursts, alternating between periods of sadness and normal play. This is called "puddle jumping"; whilst it can be confusing for adults, it is normal for children.
2. A child's understanding of death evolves as they grow. Young children may not fully grasp the permanence of death, while older children might have a more adult-like understanding.
3. Younger children might believe they can bring the person who died back through “magical thinking” - by wishing them back to life or by being well-behaved.
4. Children may express their grief through changes in behaviour, play, or physical symptoms rather than talking about their feelings.
5. Children may re-visit their loss at different developmental stages, experiencing new aspects of grief as they mature.

Age-Related Grief Responses

Infants and Toddlers (0-2 years):

- May sense a change in the family's emotional state
- May become clingy, irritable, or show changes in eating or sleeping patterns

Preschoolers (3-5 years):

- May ask repetitive questions about death and where their sibling has gone
- May engage in death-themed play
- May show regressive behaviours (e.g., bedwetting, thumb-sucking, talking less)

School-Age Children (6-12 years):

- May understand death's permanence but might have misconceptions
- May worry that they will die, or about losing another family member
- May show changes in performance at school or social interactions

Teenagers (13-18 years):

- May have an adult-like understanding of death but lack coping skills
- May struggle with expressing emotions and might withdraw
- May engage in risk-taking behaviours as a way of coping

Coping With Challenges

When explaining death to children, it's important to use simple and clear words, avoiding confusing phrases like "passed away" or "gone to sleep." Encourage children to express their feelings and ask questions, assuring them that all emotions are valid, whether they are positive or negative. This open communication helps children to process their grief more healthily.

Taking Care of Yourself

Self-care is crucial when looking after a grieving child. Allow yourself breaks to recharge and grieve yourself if and when you need to. Be gentle with yourself - supporting a child through grief is incredibly challenging.

When to Seek Additional Help

It is important to know the signs of when to seek additional help. If you or the child you are supporting are struggling with symptoms of your grief long-term it can be beneficial to reach out for professional help such as grief counselling, support groups or play therapy.

Key signs that you or the child you are supporting may need additional help can be prolonged depression and anxiety, thoughts of self-harm, struggling with day-to-day activities or complicated grief reactions that don’t improve over time. Seeking help is a sign of strength, and can be instrumental in supporting you through this difficult time.

Balancing Grief and Parenting as a Bereaved Parent

The loss of a child is devastating, and when you have other children to care for the journey through grief becomes even more complex. Balancing your need to grieve with your other children's needs for care and attention and helping them to process their own grief can be incredibly difficult.

It’s important to be honest with your children and to let them see you cry or be sad, as this models healthy grieving. However you should still allow yourself to seek moments of joy, and to enjoy positive moments with your living children without guilt.

Communication is key, and it can be helpful to communicate how you are feeling with those around you and have support in place if you are feeling overwhelmed. Don’t be afraid to ask for help from friends, family and professionals.

Creating a Legacy

Finding ways to honour your lost child for the whole family can include:

- Create a memory box or scrapbook together
- Participate in charity events or fundraisers in your child’s memory
- Plant a tree or area of your garden that you can care for in your child's memory

Final Thoughts

Supporting a grieving child through the loss of a sibling can be incredibly challenging, particularly when you may be grieving yourself. Patience, open communication, and consistency for the grieving child are key. While it's important to provide support, it's equally important to allow children space to grieve in their own way and at their own pace. Don't hesitate to seek professional help if needed, and be attentive of your own emotional state when offering this support to grieving children.

There are a number of charities that specialise in supporting bereaved siblings:

Winston's Wish
Child Bereavement UK
Bodie Hodges Foundation
Love, Jasmine
Held In Our Hearts

Other resources

The Tiny Tickers Facebook support group for bereaved heart parents is a supportive and understanding community of those who understand the loss of a child. We welcome you to join **here**.

Our website contains information and advice on navigating loss **here.**

As part of our Family Experience video series, parents discuss their experiences of dealing with bereavement. Watch the video **here**.

Many bereaved parents find comfort in creating an online tribute page after losing a child. This space, like an online memory box, can be filled with memories (photos, music and videos) and shared with family and friends. You can also light candles, write messages and give gifts. It is possible to use this page to fundraise in memory of your child, but this is by no means obligatory. You can create your free tribute page **here**.