

## Support and Advice for Parents around Children & Bereavement

14- 18  
November

**Bereaved  
Children's  
Awareness  
Week**  
Children  
grieve too



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How do we honour and grieve the child that has died while honouring their siblings and the living children left behind? In this piece, we will explore the weight of grief, both for parents but with the particular focus of most parents, the helpless feeling seeing their children grieve.

From the moment our children are born, we innately respond to and nurture their needs and feelings. We soothe our crying infant, kiss our child's sore knee better after they fall, and cuddle them as they cry when upset. In turn, they respond by feeling better, and their particular dilemma disappears. Then we, as parents, relax, feeling happy that our child is now content.

In grief, however, our magical kisses and cuddles offer comfort, but the dilemma of grief is prolonged, more like a marathon race of resilience and persistence rather than a sprint. The already overwhelming feeling of parental grief, losing a child, is further compounded by the feelings of dis-empowerment. In being unable to protect and immediately comfort/repair the pain of their living child (sibling) from their own journeying through grief. For parents themselves, grappling with managing their own intense waves of painful emotions is often unbearable. Even more so to see their children share their own expressions of grief, and as parents not able to immediately kiss away all their pain and make it all feel better. This common experience changes the dynamics and normal ways we function as a family, adding to the complexities of family grief and a forever change for your family system as each family member grieves uniquely. These additional changes can be particularly scary for children, as all of what they know is no more.

However well-meaning, parents will naturally want to fix their children's grief and heal their pain. However, the process of grief cannot be prevented, and children must be afforded the space, patience and support to grieve in their own way and at their own pace. This can be challenging while trying to cope with your own grief as a parent. Yet, children's own immature neural development requires a loan of our adult advanced understanding of death, grief and the modelling of emotional management.

Children, like adults, rarely stay fixed within their intense emotional waves of grief; instead, they move between moments of grief and normative living, creating respite and space for processing their loss. As parents, we should allow our children the opportunity to move between coping and engaging in life normally, as well as falling apart into the chaotic devastation of childhood grief.

An important message children need from parents is permission to engage in grief. Part of grief is to protest, protest their willingness to accept the loss of their sibling, protest to accept the changes in how their family operates, and protest to engage in life's norms as they did before their loss. This protest and fight for autonomy is their only subconscious strategy to cope in a world where they have no control over their loss, the relational changes within their family unit, and how others in their outside world see and treat them differently since their loss.

While some children externalise and outwardly express their grief, for example, lashing out, answering back, and angry explosions at home/school/activities. Other children internalise their grief, become socially avoidant, and change in sleep, eating and toileting habits and bed wetting. Some extreme grief expressions are extreme risk-taking behaviours as an expression of their own survival guilt. Like adults, children grieve uniquely, there is no one right way to grieve. As parents we normalise and model appropriate expressions of grief. Importantly at times, as parents we must create our own private space and avail of resources to support our own need to grieve privately also. Trigger occasions such as the many "firsts" in the first year of grieving are especially important to find the balance between honouring compassionately your own parental grief and continuing traditions for your living children. For example, Birthdays, Anniversaries, Family Breaks, Halloween and Christmas. It is best to keep these situations real and honest, about how different it will be this year without their siblings presence before the occasion. Some parents, include their lost child via a photo, a balloon release, planting a tree, garden bench and so on, but consideration ideally should also be given to creating a new family norm and a tradition that includes the living siblings in planning when appropriate. For example, change the location, schedule or activity of that occasion to reduce the intensity of triggers and model to siblings that it is O.K. to find and live moments of fun in their life today, despite all your loss. Just like it is OK for your children to move between grief and life, it is important to honour your own grief in some personal way if required. Create a private space as parents to remember and connect with your own feelings of loss.

Factors such as siblings stage of cognitive (thinking) neural development will influence your children's understanding and expressions of grief i.e. their behaviour. It is typical for children to communicate through their behaviour their internal world and often not always in a verbal format. The table below will outline typical understandings and presentations of grief depending on your child's stage of development and age.

#### Normal and Typical Presentation of Grief by Age

##### **0-2 years**

Very young children can show their distress by being clingy, they certainly notice the absent sibling but do not understand. They may withdraw into themselves and display emotional outbursts of seemingly unrelated anger and sadness, that are connected to their loss.

##### **2-4 years**

They too don't understand the finality of death and may search for the missing sibling and show quite intense emotional distress and regressive baby like behaviour, suddenly switching from playing happily to intense emotional communications. Tactile intervention: hugs, rocking will offer them a loan of your calm and some co-regulation.

##### **4-7 years**

This is the magical thinking phase of development where your child is powerfully connected to their imaginary world - good and bad. Their thinking brain of concrete thinking is only beginning to emerge, which means they can begin to grasp aspects of the death of a sibling being forever. However, their magical thinking may fight this concept as they fantasise an alternative narrative to their reality. They will have many questions that require repetitive clear and simple answering to deal with this conflict. Play will feature as an important resource and should be facilitated as a means to express their thoughts, feelings and gain a sense of mastery over their experience. Regression, nightmares, aggressive play are means to express their anger, and confusion, which sometimes includes blaming themselves for their sibling's death. Also unfounded holding of guilt for past times they had conflicts with their sibling. Observing and facilitating plenty of play of all types, will help siblings and create a portal for parents to understand their child's inner thoughts and emotions.

**7-11 years**

Concrete thinking has now developed neurologically, meaning they have a greater ability to understand the permanence of their siblings loss and how death is a universal part of life. However, the loss of a young person can be at odds with how the cycle of life should be - in turn the feelings of unfairness, confusion and lack of justice will feature strongly. They will have very direct questions, for example: does that mean you will die, or will I die too given the traumatic and sudden loss of a sibling. Changes in sleeping and eating habits are common, withdrawal from social norms: School & Hobby avoidance are common. Significant understanding, validation and support will be required as they express their confusion, anger and sadness.

**12 years +**

Depending on their stage of development, age and personality, along with circumstances of their siblings loss, all determine their individual expressions of grief. No one shoe fits all, as teenage coping strategies present uniquely. They may hide their feelings by masking them, as for some to explore or receive attuned empathy of their feelings is too overwhelming. The experience of intense grief is a frightening one for many. This may present in communicative behaviours such as rebellion, negativity, socially avoidant, mood swings and some use alcohol/drugs to numb their painful emotional overwhelm. Many teenagers will try search to find meaning in their loss and will seek normatively the support and safety of their peers, not their parents. However, without pushing, let them know you are there to listen and or collaboratively support them any time they feel ready to connect. There are many complexities in grief for this age group, their relationship with their deceased sibling, their new role if any, within the family unit. Some teenagers pause their own grief, believing they are protecting their parents or the welfare of other siblings. Explicit permission to grieve should be given to teenagers, whom try take on a parental role in such familial bereavements.

**What parents can do:**

- It is most important that parents tend to their own grieving needs as paramount before their children's. Supporting your child through their grief is no easy task, alike the oxygen mask safety protocol in an aeroplane, parents must tend to their own needs before they can be truly in a position to offer real emotional holding to their children.
- Acknowledge your child's loss, don't avoid it.
- Actively listen, repeat back what you've heard – their thoughts, opinions and especially naming any feelings. Encourage them to ask or write down question notes. If you don't know an answer, be honest and say you will try find out and come back to them. Be age appropriate in your communication.
- Try continue your typical day-to-day norms and routines.
- When appropriate, include them in decisions and planning.
- Reassure them their intense feelings are typical for grief, yet don't feel normal. Clearly state you are with them in it, as the navigate coping and feeling. That it is important they allow themselves seize moments of fun and living their best life, as well as allow grief in. This consent is very important.
- Create space and healthy safe expressions of grief particularly anger, hurt and unfairness i.e. physical output: Sport, Trampoline, Boxing bag, Hiking, shouting into a pillow, tearing up newspapers, journaling, listening/singing along to emotional songs, like angry songs, Art: clay, drawing their memories and feelings is very cathartic.
- Create access to soothing experiences involving all their 5 senses: favourite food/chewing gum, smells that sooth, fluffy sock/P.J.'s/Baths, Music that soothes (singing), Soothing T.V. shows, movies, books and ASMR – YouTube. Sensory play: Fidgets, slime, sand/water etc and Apps such as Calm & Head Space can be useful for some children.
- Be open to listening about their relationship with their deceased sibling, and any fears, guilt they may have about the same. Reassure them they are in no way to blame for the loss. Some of the best conversations occur not face to face, but in the car or completing a task together like washing up. It's less intense and dysregulatory for them.
- Reassure them that you are there for them no matter what feelings they have and how big they are within their grief – "I got you, I'm going nowhere, you are not alone".
- Remember to be mindful that they will revisit their loss as they mature and grow in cognitive development, in other words they will have a new sense of understanding their loss as they mature. They will need new explanations to help understand and process as they grow.
- Not all children need professional help given good support, patience and time. Grief is a normative experience, but a difficult one. The holding parental relationship of love and understanding is fundamentally the most important care that any grieving child needs, don't underestimate the importance of your loving relationship.