

Helping Bereaved Siblings Heal

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

Next to the death of a parent, the death of a sibling can be the most traumatic event in a child's life. Why? Because not only has a family member died, but a family member for whom the child probably had very strong and ambivalent feelings.

As those of us who have brothers and sisters know, sibling relationships are characterized by anger, jealousy and a fierce closeness and love—a highly complex melange of emotion. This complexity colors the surviving child's grief experience.

A Caring Adult's Role

How adults respond when someone loved dies has a major effect on the way children react to the death. Sometimes, adults don't want to talk about the death because they want to spare children from some of the pain and sadness.

And for the same well-intentioned but misguided reason, adults hide their own feelings of grief from children.

What bereaved siblings really need is for adults to be open and honest with them about the death. They need to see that grief is as natural a part of life as loving. Children need adults to confirm that it's all right to be sad and to cry, and that the hurt they feel now won't last forever.

When ignored, bereaved siblings may suffer more from feeling isolated than from the actual death itself. Worse yet, they may feel all alone in their grief.

What A Surviving Sibling Feels

Each person's grief is unique and changes from day to day. So, it is impossible to predict what a specific child will feel after her brother or sister dies. If you want to help, the most important thing you can do is to listen and to accept any and all feelings the surviving sibling expresses.

However, I have had the privilege to counsel hundreds of bereaved siblings. Among many other special lessons, they have taught me they often feel:

- **Guilt.** For a number of reasons, bereaved siblings often feel guilty. Their power of "magical thinking"—believing that thoughts cause actions—might make them think they literally caused the death. "John died because I sometimes wished he would go away forever" is a common response among children who haven't been given the concrete details of the sibling's death and who haven't been assured that they were not at fault.
- **Relief.** A child may also feel relief as well as pain when a sibling dies. Responses such as "Now no one will take my things" or "I'm glad I have a room to myself" are natural and do not mean the child didn't love his or her

sibling. It is important that you provide an atmosphere in which the child feels safe to express whatever he or she may be feeling.

- Fear. When a child's brother or sister dies, another young person has died. So, for a child, confronting this reality can mean confronting the possibility of one's own death. Be prepared to honestly but reassuringly answer questions such as "Will I die, too?" The death of a sibling can also make a bereaved child fear that one or all of his other family members will die, too, leaving him alone.
- Confusion. One eight-year-old girl I counseled after the death of her brother asked me, "Am I still a big sister?" This little girl was obviously struggling with the confusing task of redefining herself, both within the family unit and the world at large. The answer to her question, of course, is both yes and no, but ultimately it is a question the child must answer herself. Adults can help, however, by letting the child teach them what this confusion is like.

Siblings Can Be "Forgotten Mourners"

When a child dies, most of the grief support from family members and friends gets focused on the parents. Indeed, losing a child may be the most painful experience in life, and those of us who are parents readily empathize with and offer our support to the dead child's parents. And the parents themselves are often so overwhelmed by their loss that they can barely help themselves get through the day.

So what about the surviving siblings? Though we can't quantify grief, we can say that siblings are often as profoundly impacted by the death as their parents are. And in some ways they are even more deserving of our attention because they are children.

Let's not allow bereaved siblings to be forgotten mourners. If you are a bereaved parent, share your grief with your surviving children and make time to understand theirs. If you just can't make yourself emotionally available right now, gently explain this to the child and appoint another adult as grief helper for the time being.

Allow Siblings to Participate

Create an atmosphere that tells bereaved children that their thoughts, fears and wishes will be recognized. This recognition includes the right to help plan and participate in the funeral.

Although children may not completely understand the ceremony surrounding the death, being involved in the funeral helps establish a sense of comfort and the understanding that life goes on even though someone has died.

Since the funeral is a significant event, siblings-no matter how young-should have the same opportunity to attend as any other member of the family. Encourage, but never force. Explain the purpose of the funeral: a time to honor the person who died, a time to support each other, a time to affirm that life goes on.

When they choose to, siblings can participate in the funeral by sharing a favorite memory, reading a poem or lighting a candle. You might also suggest they place a memento or photo in the casket.

For siblings, viewing the body of the brother or sister who died can also be a positive experience. It provides an opportunity to say goodbye and helps them accept the reality of the death. As with attending the funeral, however, seeing the body should not be forced.

Talking To Children About Death

Adults sometimes have trouble facing death themselves. So open, honest discussions with children about death can be difficult. Yet adults who are able to confront, explore and learn from their own personal fears about death can help surviving siblings.

Encouraging questions about the death is another way to help bereaved siblings. Children may repeat the same questions over and over again. This is natural. Repetition and consistent, patient answers on your part help the sibling understand and slowly accept the death.

One final word about children's questions: Don't feel you need to have all the answers. Your answers aren't as important as the fact that you're responding in a way that shows you care.

Let Children Be Children

Children need to be children-especially when they are hurting. Never tell a surviving sibling, "You need to take care of your mom and dad (or younger siblings) now." When you force a bereaved child to grow up too soon, you don't allow him the time and space he needs to mourn in his own developmentally appropriate way.

Help Siblings Embrace Their Memories

When a sibling dies, the surviving children must go through the long, arduous process of realizing and acknowledging that their brother or sister is gone forever. The permanence of death is difficult for everyone, even adults, to accept.

Thank goodness for memories. Remembering the child who died is an appropriate way for the sibling to continue that precious relationship. Encourage her to talk about her memories, both good and bad. Show her ways to capture her memories, such as by creating a scrapbook or writing a poem. On special occasions like birthdays and holidays, help her remember what it was like to celebrate with her brother or sister. Remembering the past makes hoping for the future possible.

Guidelines for Helping Grieving Children

- Be a good observer. A bereaved child's behavior can be very telling about her emotions.
- Be patient. Children's grief isn't typically obvious and immediate.
- Be honest. Don't lie to children about death. They need to know that it's permanent and irreversible. Don't use euphemisms that cloud these facts. Use simple and direct language.

- Be available. Bereaved children need to know that they can count on the adults in their lives to listen to them, support them and love them.
- Listen. Let each child teach you what grief is like for him. And don't rush in with explanations. Usually it's more helpful to ask exploring questions than to supply cookie-cutter answers.

About the Author

Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt is a noted author, educator and practicing grief counselor. He serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado and presents dozens of grief-related workshops each year across North America. Among his books are *Healing Your Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas* and *The Healing Your Grieving Heart Journal for Teens*. For more information, write or call The Center for Loss and Life Transition, 3735 Broken Bow Road, Fort Collins, Colorado 80526, (970) 226-6050 or visit their website, www.centerforloss.com.

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