

# Sibling Loss: How Caring Adults Can Help

Regardless of age, anyone who has experienced a loss will mourn and grieve. If we can love, we can grieve. For children, grief is experienced differently according to their age. They tend to re-visit their grief with each developmental stage as they gain new levels of understanding of death and the impact the loss has on their lives. While each child's reaction to death and loss is unique according to their personality, level of maturity, and the depth and significance of the relationship with the deceased, there are some common responses for children who have experienced the death of a brother or sister.

## SIBLING DEVELOPMENT

Brothers and sisters are each others' first playmates, friends and confidantes. They share each others' secrets, their plans for the future and their feelings about their parents, both positive and negative. Siblings can be best friends one minute and jealous enemies the next. Brothers and sisters often spend more time together than with their parents or friends.

Sibling rivalry is the way children learn to distinguish themselves from their brother/sister, exert their independence and define their uniqueness. As siblings mature they come to understand and accept their role, and that of their sibling, within the family.

## HOW CARING ADULTS CAN HELP A BEREAVED SIBLING

- Tell the child/youth that you are always available to listen. Validate, normalize, and recognize their feelings and the full weight of their grief experience. Share stories with them about their sibling and don't be afraid to say their name.
- Don't minimize or ignore their pain by focusing solely on their parents. Statements like "you have to be strong for your mom and dad", can make bereaved siblings feeling like forgotten mourners. Understand that the grief and longing for their sibling will last their entire lifetime.
- Holidays and special days such as birthdays, first day of school, dance recitals, etc., can be full of memories and significance for the child or youth who is grieving their sibling. Almost anything can be a hidden emotional trigger for grievers; Terry Fox Day, Remembrance Day, songs, smells, colours. You can help by working together with the child to develop a signal and plan for accommodation when they need an emotional break from their overwhelming feelings.

## COMMON REACTIONS TO THE DEATH AND LOSS

Children/youth who are grieving the death of a sibling may experience and demonstrate a multitude of feelings and reactions, some of which may even seem contradictory. If the sibling who died had been ill for an extended time the surviving child may feel relieved to have their parents' attention shift back to them, but they may also feel ashamed for having these feelings. A child/youth may feel guilty for the fights they had with their brother/sister and may even believe that they played a part, or somehow caused, their sibling's death. Surviving siblings often experience deep and longlasting feelings of loneliness after the death of their expected life-long companion and playmate.

Children and youth who are grieving the death of their sibling may also have feelings of guilt that they are alive, and their sibling is not; "survivor guilt". They may believe that they should have died instead of their sibling because then their parents wouldn't be so sad. They hold the mistaken belief that their death wouldn't affect their parents in the same way as their brother/sister's death. Bereaved siblings are also grieving the loss of the parents and the family structure they knew before the death occurred.

- Include in the child's accommodation plan the best way for them to contact their parents if they are feeling extremely worried for their parent's safety. This is a prevalent fear for grieving children. Some children find comfort and support in wearing or having something special in their desk that reminds them of their parent or sibling.
- Bereaved siblings will carry the memories and loss of their brother/sister throughout their entire lives. Encourage them to find ways to remember their sibling and to include them in their life. Journaling, talking to them in 'their mind', talking about them with classmates and friends, or imagining how their brother or sister would respond and react to everyday occurrences, can help them develop strong, healthy, healing bonds.

### Suggested readings:

*Incredibly Lonely, That's Me* - Ben Keckler  
*Turned Upside Down* - Teana Tache

*Mick Harte Was Here* - Barbara Park  
*Lost and Found Remembering A Sister* - Ellen Yeomans

*The Empty Room Surviving the Loss of a Brother or Sister at Any Age* - Elizabeth DeVita-Raeburn