



Handout 6: Bereavement

Reactions of Younger Children to the Death of a Sibling

“At a time when they (children) need all the support of positive family experience . . . ironically it is the time when parents have least to offer as they struggle to survive their grief.” *Kathy La Tour*

Children, like adults, are individuals. They go through stages of physical, mental, emotional and social development but the details for each child are unique. Grief and the variety of ways in which it can be expressed needs to be acknowledged.

1 Reactions Which May Occur

Text

1.1 Once realisation of the death has begun, children, like adults, will enter a period of shock which will last for a few hours or up to a week. It can manifest itself by the child going through daily life mechanically, automatically smiling on cue, apprehensive, and they may have periods of panic. Alternatively, they may become withdrawn and gaze into space for long periods.

1.2 The death of a close relative heightens our sense of vulnerability and for children death and separation are synonymous. They may:-

- become very anxious about being separated from parents for any reason
- be reluctant to go to school
- be depressed
- be prone to infection ie. colds, ear infections and tummy upsets
- bite nails or cuticles, pick themselves, twiddle with their hair
- develop a fear of the dark (which may last for years)
- have difficulty in going to sleep
- have nightmares
- develop a phobia about hospitals, nurses and doctors

1.3 Regression to an earlier stage in development is common

1.3.1 Loss of concentration for children at school

1.3.2 Food can become important. Some children will eat and eat to fill the emptiness they feel inside. They may hoard food and secrete it away. Others though will lose interest in eating. The phase usually only lasts a comparatively short time

1.3.3 Sadness and anger need to be expressed but children are often afraid and confused about venting their feelings as they do not know what is allowed



Handout 6: Bereavement

Reactions of Younger Children to the Death of a Sibling

1.3.4 Some may be frightened to ask questions and will only talk to outsiders while other children only want to talk about the tragedy to the immediate family

1.3.5 The time put on the grief process for a child is the same as parents – approximately two years

2 Reactions by Age Group

Children process information differently from adults and this process changes as they grow.

2.1 **Babies** are affected by their parents' emotional state, although a twin is likely to miss the other regardless. Reactions may include being very unsettled for a few weeks, losing weight and sleeping difficulties.

2.2 **Toddlers (1-3 years)** cannot understand the permanence of death and may ask repeatedly about the child coming back. They do not easily distinguish fact from fantasy and may believe they did something wrong which caused the death. They may regard their parents' apparent lack of interest in them as rejection. Separation anxiety is the key symptom. Problems in toddlers are generally behavioural expressions of loss and insecurity and include reversion to baby talk, regression in toilet training, nightmares, insomnia and refusal to be left alone. Some search repeatedly for the child and others may act out the tragedy with their toys.

2.3 **Magical Thinking Stage (3-7 years approximately)** begins in an egocentric stage of growth which the child perceives that his is the centre of the universe and so believes his own thoughts, wishes and actions cause what happens to himself and to other people. When told about the death they will probably react quite casually because they are used to playing "bang, bang, you're dead and getting up again". Most likely they will cry and ask about the death at a later time, perhaps bedtime, as though you had never explained it before. This can be confusing for parents. The child may be frightened and remorseful that their jealous thoughts about the dead child made it go away. Their parents' preoccupation with the dead child may be seen as confirmation of their guilt, or they may try to comfort their parents in the way they have been previously comforted.



Handout 6: Bereavement

Reactions of Younger Children to the Death of a Sibling

Children may experience a compelling urge to recover the lost loved one and will make every effort to search for them. This fits in with magical thinking which is reinforced by fairy and folk tales. Children will think that if they are always good and endure bad things and wait for a very long time the dead child will return and all will be “happy ever after.” The child may re-enact the cause of death or an aspect of it such as a funeral. This should not be discouraged as play is the means by which children integrate and master life’s experiences.

Some children become fearful that they may die themselves, or that they may disappear, or their parents might go away and so do not want to let parents out of their sight.

2.3.1 Concrete Thinking Stage (7-12 years) Children at this age think in terms of either/or ie. good guys or bad guys. They have little ability to deal with subtleties, ambiguities or euphemisms. So care must be taken not to use figures of speech such as “we lost your sister”, etc.

The permanence of death starts to be recognised and by 9-10 years the irreversibility of it begins to be grasped and children realise they themselves will die one day. Over 1 year a child perceives the finality of death in an adult way.

3 Ideas on How To Help Children With Their Grief

“A child can lie through anything so long as he or she is told the truth and is allowed to share with loved ones the natural feelings people have when they are suffering.” *Eda Le Shan*

I have divided my thoughts, developed through experience and also from reading, into two categories, loosely defined as General Ideas and Practical Ideas, as listed below. Thanks and acknowledgements are also due to Claudia Jewitt, HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH SEPARATION AND LOSS. Marjorie Mitchell, BEREAVED CHILDREN and Kathy Le Tour, FOR THOSE THAT LIVE – helping children cope with the death of a brother or sister, for some of the ideas listed here, and as major references for articles provided in this pack. *Margaret Hayworth*

3.1 General Ideas

The first think to communicate to a child is “You are not alone; I am with you.”



Handout 6: Bereavement

Reactions of Younger Children to the Death of a Sibling

Share all feelings with children. They want and need information and participation in their grief process. Often parents wish to protect their children from reality seeing it as a time of innocence.

Let children know that feelings take precedence – stop cooking, reading the paper, etc.

Make sure children get the clear message that the death was not their fault. It was not because they were bad in any way or because they were unlovable. Neither was there anything they could have done or still do to alter the situation.

Do not tell the child not to worry, or not to be sad, etc. As with parental grief, they are unable to control their responses. Also avoid message that tell the child what he or she should or should not be feeling. As parents we know the feelings simply ARE/WERE. Do not criticise or seem shocked by statements and feelings.

Encourage the child to accept strong feelings explaining that recovery to creative healthy living involves pain. Unfortunately there is no short cut.

Be honest about the deceased and show that they were loved for themselves along with all their strengths and weaknesses. Let children know their value has not changed, they are loved and special.

Do not deny your pain. It is all right to cry in front of your child.

The child may speak of feeling and presence of the dead person. Do not dismiss these lightly because some children, like some adults, do have these experiences.

Do not say the dead child “fell asleep and did not wake up.”

Do not say, “we lost our child” as children will fear becoming lost while out shopping, etc.

Take care of your marriage.

Parent-teacher cooperation should be sought. Teachers underestimate the time that a child will be disorganised. It usually last beyond the first anniversary of the death.



Handout 6: Bereavement

Reactions of Younger Children to the Death of a Sibling

Do not worry about regression. Allow it until equilibrium and energies are renewed. The child usually emerges stronger and more competent. If the regressive behaviour causes problems away from the home, try asking the child if they could confine the behaviour to the home only, explaining your reasons for this request. To increase confidence, encourage the child in all his or her abilities.

3.2 *Practical Ideas*

Many children will respond to physical comfort. Suggestions are:-

- (a) Give special foods. Soft foods can be reassuring and are a reminder of earlier, easier times
- (b) Children respond to snuggling against a warm, soft rough surface. So let them sleep between flannelette sheets or have a blanket on top of them
- (c) Extra clothes in the daytime help to reduce the coldness of shock and instils a feeling of being lovingly wrapped and protected against possible harm

If the child has difficulty in settling to sleep for relaxation, allow a radio or tape to play softly. For fear of the dark, use a night light.

Children need physical play. Try not to cut this time down even if the child is getting behind with his school work due to lack of concentration. Seek help from a teacher.

Grief is tiring, so alternate a child's passive and active occupations. Arrange a quiet time in the afternoon and plan an early bedtime.

If the child is having difficulty following directions, write out lists. These can be done in the form of pictures for the very young.

A special outing, treat, present or new colourful clothes can bring comfort and help to create a feeling of security.

If the child is over-eating, serve the food on individual plates. You could say "I wonder if you are really hungry. Let's try a cuddle instead." Offer small nourishing meals to those who lost interest in eating. For both over-eating and under-eating, teach the child to cook.



Handout 6: Bereavement

Reactions of Younger Children to the Death of a Sibling

4 Coping with Christmas, Birthdays, Special Occasions & Anniversaries, For Parents Whose Child Has Died

Christmas Time – The whole world seems consumed with tinsel and glitter, but those who grieve are only aware of the terrible hole in their hearts and in their lives. Knowing the intense pain of the holiday season, here are some helpful thoughts which other bereaved parents have shared, with the hope of making your holidays easier to handle:-

We must realise that grieving persons have definite limitations; we do not function at normal capacity. Therefore we must re-evaluate our priorities and decide what is really meaningful for ourselves and families. We must decide what we can handle comfortably – and let these needs be known to family, friends and relatives:-

- Whether or not to talk about our child openly
- Whether we can handle the responsibility of the family dinner, parties, etc or if we wish someone else to take over some of these traditional tasks
- Whether we will stay here for holidays or choose to run away to a totally different holiday environment this year

4.1 ***Don't be afraid to make changes, it really can make things less painful:-***

- Open presents Christmas Eve instead of Christmas Day
- Have dinner at a different time
- Attend a different church for the Christmas service
- Let the children take over decorating the tree, making cakes, pies etc

4.2 ***Our greatest comfort may come in doing something for others. Some parents:-***

- Donate the money they would have spent on a child's gift to a charity
- Give a gift in memory of their child



Handout 6: Bereavement

Reactions of Younger Children to the Death of a Sibling

- Adopt a needs family for the holidays
- Invite a guest (foreign student, senior citizen, etc) to share festivities

4.3 Christmas stockings; we may decide to:-

- Put them all up
- Hang no stockings at all
- Put thoughts and feelings about our child on notes and put them in that special stocking. Family members are free to read them (a special opportunity for younger children to express feelings)

Whether it's greetings cards, holiday baking, putting up the tree, decorating outside or having a big family dinner, ask before making any decisions:-

- Have I involved or considered my other children?
- Do I really enjoy doing this? Do other family members really enjoy it?
- Would Christmas be Christmas without it?

One family burns a Special Candle on all their Special Days to quietly include their absent daughter.

One mother buys a house plant for her home as a living memorial to her son for the holiday season, another always orders a bouquet of orange flowers.

Christmas shopping is definitely easier if you make the entire list out ahead of time. Then, when one of those "good days" comes along, you can get your shopping done quickly and with less confusion.

If the thought of sending holiday cards is simply too exhausting, yet you discover that some of your friends are still unaware of your child's death, try this suggestion; enclose a simple little funeral service card or a copy of an announcement from your newspaper inside the already bought greetings card. Parents have found the response from friends most rewarding.



Handout 6: Bereavement

Reactions of Younger Children to the Death of a Sibling

5 When a Child in Your School Is Bereaved

Teachers and classmates make up a child's second family, they too have strong feelings when a member experiences a death. These guidelines have been prepared by bereaved parents, surviving children, school personnel and professional caregivers in an effort to help those who want to help a child.

Children tend to express their grief in their ways of behaving. They act out their feelings and emotions. We cannot always know what they are thinking or feeling. Take cues from their behaviour.

All children react differently. Withdrawal, aggressiveness, panic, anxiety, anger, guilt, fear, regression and symptoms of bodily distress are all signs of grief. Be patient and understanding.

When children are grieving, they have shortened attention spans and may have trouble concentrating. School work may be affected.

A child may attempt to deny feelings of anger, hurt and fear by repressing them. Eventually grief takes over and their feelings leak out. It may be months or even years before a child displays signs of a full impact of a family death. Bereaved children must re-establish a self-identity. "Who am I?" becomes a major concern. Help them in their search.

A child's perceptions of death change with age and experience. The pre-school and kindergarten age child may see death as temporary. The 6-10 year old becomes aware of the reality and finality of death. He may be curious about death and burial rituals. By 11, a child begins to perceive death on an adult level.

If a pupil seeks you out to talk, be available and REALLY LISTEN. Hear with your ears, your eyes and your heart. TOUCH, a warm hug says; "I know what happened and I care. I am here if you need me". Face your own feelings about death. Share your feelings with the child and with your class. It is all right to cry, be sad or angry. It is even all right to smile. Be open and honest with feelings. Create an atmosphere of open acceptance that invites question and fosters confidence and love. Encourage children to express their grief in all its forms. Be supportive and available.

Ensure that members of staff, especially in a large school, care fully aware of what has happened to a bereaved child, so that the child is not unnecessarily hurt by a chance remark made in ignorance by a staff member. Provide a quiet, private place to come to whenever the pupil needs to be alone. Almost anything can trigger tears. Help pupils realise that grief is a natural and normal reaction to loss.



Handout 6: Bereavement

Reactions of Younger Children to the Death of a Sibling

Do not isolate or insulate children from death. Expose pupils to death as a natural part of life. Use such opportunities as a fallen leaf, a wilted flower, the death of an insect, bird or class pet to discuss death as a part of the life cycle. Talk together as a classroom family. By sharing a grief, we help eliminate the compounding problems of school and social isolation the bereaved often experience.

Try not to single out the grieving child for special privileges or compensations. He still needs to feel a part of his peer group and should be expected to function accordingly. Tamper your expectations with kindness and understanding, but continue to expect him to function.

If possible, talk to a few of the bereaved pupil's friends to help them cope and explore how to be supportive. Friends may be uncomfortable and awkward in their attempts to make contact. Help a pupil find a supportive peer group; perhaps there are pupils in the school who are coping with similar losses. An invitation to share with each other might be welcome.

Have resources available in the library about death and grief. You might offer to read a book with the child. (See Book List)

Establish lines of communication with the parents. Keep each other informed about the child's progress. It is important and appropriate for the school community to acknowledge the death of a pupil. Make a scrapbook, hold an assembly, plant a tree, have a small memorial service. Do something to acknowledge the death (thus giving other children permission to do the same).

As a child learns to cope, continue to be available; continue to reach out and care, just as you do now.

6 Recommended Books for Children & Young People as an Introduction to Death & Dying

6.1 Under 7's

- (a) Badger's Parting Gifts - Susan Varley, Collins
- (b) I'll Always Love You - Hans Wilhelm, Hodder & Stoughton
- (c) The Tenth Good Thing About Barney - Judith Korset, Collins
- (d) Water Bugs & Dragonflies - Doris Stickney, Mowbray



Handout 6: Bereavement

Reactions of Younger Children to the Death of a Sibling

6.2 Over 7's – 11

- (a) Charlotte's Web – EB White, Penguin
- (b) Mama's Going to Buy You a Mocking Bird – Jean Little, Penguin
- (c) The Friends – Rosa Guy, Penguin

6.3 Leaflets available from CRUSE for a small sum:-

- (a) When Children Grieve
- (b) The Motherless Child
- (c) My Father Died
- (d) My Mother Died

6.3.1 Books suitable for bereaved parents:-

- (a) The Bereaved Parent – Harriet Sannoff Schiff, Human Horizon Series
- (b) Death Comes Home – S Stephens
- (c) Grief of Parents When a Child Dies – M Miles
- (d) Help for Bereaved Parents – M Tengborn
- (e) Let Go and Live – M Ashton
- (f) The price of Loving – J Davis