

SIBLING BEREAVEMENT

The bereaved child has to deal with the challenges of coping with a major life tragedy, equipped only with limited knowledge and life experience. (See other Information Sheets for more discussion of the limitations at different ages.) When a child loses a sibling, there is an even greater possibility of misunderstanding and emotional hurt.

The following comments are intended for the information of caring adults. It is usually better not to interpret a child's behavior directly, except in the broadest way: "Perhaps you are feeling cranky because you are missing John. I sometimes feel that way too". But it can be helpful to have some sense of the child's-eye-view. Of course the child's age will affect the way s/he experiences events, but these thoughts and worries have been described by many bereaved children at different developmental stages..

The child's sense of security is substantially undermined. If this can happen to a sibling, then it could happen to them. Caring adults can be especially attentive to the surviving children's needs and understanding about demands that might otherwise seem insensitive or egocentric. There is often an increased need for predictability, for advance notice of changes in plan, for warnings about upcoming separations from security figures and for extra help with transitions.

Children's sense that parents are omnipotent and able to protect them from all dangers is destroyed. The child may feel unsafe and even betrayed by the parents' inability to avert the tragedy. This can be especially painful if there was conflict between a parent and the child who died.

Childhood squabbles or jealousies with the sibling who died may be a source of intense distress or guilt for the surviving child. Children whose developmental phase leaves them vulnerable to magical thinking (3 years to 8 or 9 years old) are especially at risk for feeling that somehow, their anger contributed to the death.

Brothers and sisters often spend a great deal of time together, and there is a whole subculture independent of the parents. The child's role in the family is changed, s/he may now be the oldest or youngest, or have lost his or her protector -- or tormentor. The child's world view and his or her identity are both profoundly changed by the loss of a sibling.

Parents may be preoccupied with their mourning for an extended period. Children are sometimes witnessing intense distress in their parents for the first time. They often wonder, "Would they be equally sad if I had been the one who died?" "Do they wish it had been me instead?" "I feel that I don't matter as much as the child who died." They will benefit greatly from being reassured that they are valued and loved and that their existence is a source of comfort to the parents.

Children seek ways to comfort their parents. It is healing to children to know that they can be helpful and comforting, but it is also important to guard against the possibility of the child assuming an ongoing protective stance. It is also important to help to honor and preserve the individuality of the surviving children; there can otherwise be a tendency in some children to try to imitate the child who died and to become a "replacement child".

Good communication in the bereaved family, or with trusted adults, is the best emotional insurance for children who lose a sibling. Reassurance about safety concerns, repeated expressions of love, the inclusion of surviving children in family discussions and plans -- in short, making certain the surviving child knows s/he is still important -- these are the keys to the future functioning of the new family unit.