

Sibling Grief Throughout Childhood

By Betty Davies, PhD

From the time that a new baby enters the family, a special bond develops between the children. Siblings protect one another, support one another and ally together against parents and others. Siblings play significant roles in each other's lives, and a sibling's death can be traumatic for brothers and sisters left behind. In fact, siblings' stories indicate that the impact of such a death lasts a lifetime, perpetually influencing their ways of being in the world.



Not all siblings are affected to the same degree by a child's death. Parents, in fact, need to be advised that each child in the family will react differently. Many factors come into play to affect children's grief responses. Individual sibling characteristics come into play — for example, the child's age and gender, health status, temperament or coping style and previous experience with loss. Situational factors must be considered as well. These include characteristics of the situation itself, such as duration of illness, cause of death, where the death occurred and whether the bereaved children who were given the choice and became actively involved in the care of their sibling or in planning of the funeral.

Psychosocial environmental factors also have an enormous impact upon sibling grief. The nature of the pre-death relationship, for example, is critical. When children have shared many aspects of their lives, the loss of one child leaves a large empty space in the surviving sibling. The family environment also significantly impacts upon grieving siblings. For example, children do better in families where feelings, thoughts and ideas are more freely expressed; a sense of cohesion or closeness exists, and bereaved siblings exhibit fewer behavioral problems (Davies, 1988, 1999). Because it is the interactions siblings have with the adults in their lives that are critical, thinking of sibling responses with the words that brothers and sisters themselves have used to describe their experience offers guidance in our interactions with grieving siblings.

"I hurt inside." The siblings' feelings include sadness, anger, frustration, loneliness, fear, irritability and all the many other emotions that characterize grief. Unlike adults who often talk about their emotional responses, children are often unable or inexperienced at identifying what they are feeling.

For children who "hurt inside," the goal is to help children accept whatever emotion they experience and to manage those emotions in appropriate ways. This is easier said than done. Because children seldom verbalize their thoughts and feelings — at least not in adults' terms — it's important that caring adults watch for changes in the child's behavior and respond sensitively. Children who are hurting inside need comforting and consoling. They do not need lectures, judgments, teasing or interrogations. Rather, they need someone who is consistent and honest, and who is willing to share his or her own thoughts and feelings with the child. Helping children who "hurt inside" is a two-way process.

"I don't understand." How children begin to make sense of death depends in large part on their level of cognitive development. To help children who "don't understand," adults need to

remember that confusion and ignorance are additional forms of hurting. Adults have a responsibility to be aware of what children understand, and to offer honest explanations that fit with the children's developmental capabilities. As siblings grow and develop new ways of viewing and understanding the world, they will have new questions about the death. Caregivers must be open to children's questions, giving them the freedom to ask whatever they want without fear of ridicule. Helping children understand is not just providing information

about facts and events; it also is giving information about feelings, about what to expect and about what not to expect.

"I don't belong." A death in the family tears apart the normal day-to-day patterns of family life. Siblings do not know what to do or how to help, and if they try, their efforts may not be acknowledged; they may begin to feel as if they are not part of what is happening. They also feel their experience makes them different from their peers. To prevent siblings from feeling as if they "don't belong," adults can encourage children to help in some way in the activities of caring for an ill brother or sister, or involving them in the rituals surrounding death. Ensure that the child's individual choices are respected.

"I'm not enough." Siblings typically want to make their parents feel better, but no matter what they do, their parents' sadness persists and they are "not enough" to make their parents happy. Helping siblings to feel as if they are valued, loved and considered to be special by the adults in their lives is the best way to help children avoid feeling as if they are "not enough." If adults interact with bereaved siblings in ways that comfort their hurt, validate their worth, clarify their confusion and involve them in what is happening, it is unlikely that bereaved siblings will feel as if they are "not enough."

I have often asked siblings what advice they have for adults who want to help grieving children. They inevitably respond, "Don't forget the brothers and sisters!" Their words capture well the most important message. Though sibling grief may be a difficult, long and lonely journey, it is not one that siblings must travel alone if the significant adults in their lives acknowledge the impact of sibling bereavement and are willing to walk alongside them on their journey, comforting and consoling, teaching, involving and validating. ■

References

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About the Author

Betty Davies, RN, FAAN, PhD, is a professor in the department of family health care nursing at the University of California San Francisco. She has gained international recognition through numerous publications and presentations, and her leadership in helping to establish North America's first free-standing children's hospice in Vancouver, Canada. Her e-mail address is betty.davies@nursing.ucsf.edu.