



GRIEVING THE DEATH OF A SIBLING

*Understanding the Unique Experience of a Child
Whose Brother or Sister Has Died*

When a brother or sister dies, a child loses someone who may have shared their home, routines, parents, history, arguments, secrets, play, and expectations for the future. At the same time, the surviving child is living inside a family where the adults are grieving too. Sibling grief can be profound even when it is expressed quietly or inconsistently.

THE WHOLE FAMILY MAY FEEL DIFFERENT

The surviving child may miss their sibling while also reacting to changes in parents, routines, attention, family roles, and the emotional atmosphere at home. They may worry about causing more pain by talking about their own needs.

WHAT YOU MAY NOTICE

- Missing ordinary interactions such as playing, arguing, sharing a room, riding to school, or family routines.
- Guilt about past fights, jealousy, relief, or moments when they wished the sibling would go away.
- Fear that they or another family member may die, especially if the sibling's death was sudden or illness-related.

GENTLE REMINDER

Do not assume a child is grieving less because they talk less. Sibling grief may appear through behavior, play, silence, questions, anger, or ordinary moments of missing what used to be.

MAKE SPACE FOR THE SURVIVING CHILD

Ask about their experience without assuming it matches the parents' grief. Give the child individual attention that is not always centered on the sibling who died. They still need permission to have needs, accomplishments, problems, and ordinary childhood experiences.

WORDS THAT CAN HELP

Try: "You do not have to protect me from your feelings." "Fighting with your brother did not cause his death." "It is okay to miss her and also enjoy being with your friends." "You are still allowed to need us."

ADDRESS GUILT AND COMPARISON

Sibling relationships naturally include conflict, rivalry, jealousy, and affection. A child may remember only the difficult moments after a death. Reassure them that ordinary sibling feelings did not cause the death. Avoid idealizing the child who died in ways that make the surviving child feel they can never measure up.





KEEP THE SIBLING'S PLACE WITHOUT FREEZING THE FAMILY

Photographs, stories, traditions, memory boxes, and speaking the sibling's name can support connection. At the same time, allow bedrooms, routines, family roles, and traditions to evolve when the family is ready. Change does not mean the sibling has been forgotten.

NOTICE THE SURVIVING CHILD'S MILESTONES

- Birthdays, graduations, achievements, and life transitions can carry both pride and grief. Celebrate the surviving child fully. Acknowledge the missing sibling when appropriate without allowing every milestone to become primarily about the death.
- REMEMBERING DEVELOPMENT MATTERS
- A young child may understand the sibling's death differently years later. As they mature, they may grieve the future they expected to share - school years, adulthood, family gatherings, nieces and nephews, or growing old together.

A THOUGHT TO CARRY WITH YOU

The child who died remains part of the family, and the child who is living still needs permission to be fully seen, supported, celebrated, and loved.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

What has changed most in this child's everyday life since their sibling died? Are they receiving attention for who they are, not only for being the surviving sibling?

WHEN MORE SUPPORT MAY HELP

Additional support may be helpful when guilt, fear, withdrawal, behavior changes, family conflict, traumatic reactions, or difficulties in daily functioning remain intense or worsen.

A GENTLE CLOSING

A surviving sibling deserves room for their own grief and their own life. They can carry their brother or sister with them while continuing to grow into a person whose story includes much more than the loss.

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