

# When a Brother or Sister Dies

Understanding the grief nobody sees

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## A Guide for Parents

When a child dies, surviving siblings face a unique and often invisible grief. Research shows that bereaved siblings frequently deal with their grief alone—not wanting to upset their already-devastated parents—which increases the risk for complicated grief and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>1,2</sup> This guide helps parents understand and support their surviving children through one of the most difficult experiences a family can endure.

As Dr. Christina Hibbert writes: "When a parent dies, you lose the past. When a child dies, you lose the future. When a sibling dies, you lose the past **and** the future."<sup>3</sup>

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## The Double Loss

Bereaved siblings don't just lose a brother or sister. They often lose their parents too—at least temporarily. When parents are overwhelmed by their own grief, surviving children can become emotionally invisible. Researchers call this the **"double loss"**: the death of the sibling and the unavailability of parents who are consumed by grief.<sup>1,4</sup>

This double loss manifests in several ways:

- Surviving children may feel guilty for needing their parents' attention.
- They may suppress their own grief to protect their parents from more pain.
- They may feel pressure to "replace" the deceased sibling or to be perfect.
- They may take on adult caregiving roles far beyond their years.
- Family roles shift: the youngest becomes the oldest, an only child emerges, identities reshape.
- Parents may unconsciously compare surviving children to the deceased or idealize the lost child.

### What Siblings Need to Hear

- "Your grief matters just as much as mine."
- "I'm your parent and I'm still here for you, even when I'm sad."
- "You don't need to take care of me. That's not your job."
- "You are not a replacement. You are you, and I love you for exactly who you are."

## How Siblings Grieve at Different Ages

### Preschool siblings (ages 2–5)

- May not understand the permanence of death and expect the sibling to return.
- Upset by changes in routine; clingy with surviving parent.
- May act out the death through play—this is normal processing, not disturbing behavior.
- Nightmares, tantrums, regression in milestones (bedwetting, baby talk).<sup>1</sup>

### School-age siblings (ages 6–12)

- Understand the finality of death and may fear their own death or the death of the surviving parent.
- May feel responsible—especially if they ever fought with or wished harm on the sibling.
- Irritability, anger, avoidance, physical complaints (stomachaches, headaches).
- School performance often declines; difficulty concentrating.
- May try to be “perfect” to avoid burdening parents, or may act out to get attention.<sup>1,2</sup>

### Teenage siblings (ages 13–18)

- Search for meaning and wrestle with existential questions.
- May withdraw from family and prefer to grieve with peers.
- Risk-taking behavior, substance use, and self-harm are possible danger signs.
- May feel guilty for being alive, for being happy, for wanting normalcy.
- Future worries: Will I get the same disease? Will my parents survive this?<sup>1</sup>

## The Feelings Siblings Won't Tell You

Surviving siblings often carry emotions they are afraid or ashamed to express. Research from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network identifies several “hidden” emotional responses that parents should be aware of:<sup>1</sup>

#### **Guilt**

- Survivor’s guilt: “Why did they die and not me?”
- Guilt over past fights or unkind words
- Guilt for feeling happy or wanting to play
- Belief that thoughts or wishes caused the death

#### **Relief**

- If the sibling was ill, relief that suffering ended
- Relief from caregiving demands or hospital visits
- Shame about feeling relieved
- Relief that family tension has eased

**Anger**

- At the sibling for “leaving”
- At parents for being too absorbed in grief
- At God or “the universe” for allowing it
- At others who still have their siblings

**Fear**

- Fear of another death in the family
- Fear that they will get the same illness
- Fear of being forgotten themselves
- Fear of their own mortality

**Key insight:** All of these feelings are normal. Naming them—“Some kids feel angry at their brother for dying. Have you ever felt that way?”—gives children permission to express what they’re hiding.<sup>1,3</sup>

## What the Research Shows: Long-Term Effects

The impact of sibling loss can be profound and long-lasting. Adult siblings have reported effects up to 9 years after the death. Research shows bereaved siblings may fall 0.23 to 0.52 years behind in schooling, which can affect earnings, social assistance needs, and other socioeconomic outcomes.<sup>2</sup>

However, the research also reveals a powerful finding about resilience:

### Resilience in Bereaved Adolescents

- In Oltjenbruns’ landmark study, **96% of bereaved adolescents reported at least one positive outcome** from their grief experience.<sup>5</sup>
- 74% reported a **deeper appreciation for life**.
- 67% reported **greater care for loved ones**.
- Other positive outcomes included strengthened emotional bonds, development of emotional strength, and increased empathy.
- Greater maturity was the most common personal change reported by bereaved siblings over time.<sup>2</sup>

### Negative outcomes that may require intervention:

- Anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress symptoms.<sup>2</sup>
- Risky behaviors, decreased communication with family.
- Difficulty with peer relationships and social withdrawal.
- Academic decline and reduced educational attainment.
- Complicated grief, especially when siblings grieve alone and don’t want to burden parents.<sup>2</sup>

**A critical finding:** Bereaved siblings who were more open with family members had **three times lower risk for anxiety** compared to those who were less open.<sup>2</sup> Open, honest family communication is one of the strongest protective factors.

## Practical Steps for Parents

Supporting surviving children while managing your own grief is one of the hardest things a parent can do. These evidence-based strategies can help:<sup>1,2,3</sup>

### 1. Acknowledge their grief explicitly.

Don't assume children are "fine" because they're playing or laughing. Say: "I know you're sad about your sister. I am too. Your sadness matters to me."

### 2. Name the emotions they can't.

Proactively bring up guilt, anger, fear, and relief. "Some kids feel angry when a sibling dies. That's normal. Do you ever feel that way?"

### 3. Don't compare or idealize.

Avoid making the deceased sibling into a saint. Surviving children need to know they are valued for themselves, not measured against a lost sibling.

### 4. Maintain routines.

Structure and predictability provide security. Keep bedtimes, mealtimes, and school routines as consistent as possible.

### 5. Include them in decisions.

Let them participate in choices about the sibling's belongings, memorial activities, and how to honor their brother or sister. Hold family meetings.

### 6. Get your own support.

You cannot pour from an empty cup. Seek grief support for yourself so you can be present for your surviving children. Model healthy grief—don't hide your tears, but show them you are coping.

### 7. Create dedicated one-on-one time.

Even 15 minutes a day of focused attention tells a surviving child: "You are seen. You matter. You are not invisible."

### 8. Prepare for triggers.

Birthdays, holidays, the anniversary of the death, milestones the sibling will never reach—anticipate these together and plan how to honor them.

### 9. Talk about the deceased openly.

Don't avoid the topic. Share memories, use their name, keep photos visible. Avoiding the subject teaches children that grief is something to hide.

### 10. Watch for warning signs.

Persistent withdrawal, declining grades, self-harm, substance use, suicidal ideation, or unrelenting guilt lasting beyond 6 weeks—seek professional help immediately.

### **When to Seek Professional Help**

If your child talks about wanting to die, join the deceased sibling, or expresses persistent hopelessness, seek professional help immediately. Contact the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (call or text 988) or take them to the nearest emergency room. Traumatic grief in children is treatable—Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT) has strong evidence of effectiveness for bereaved children.

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