



# The Compassionate Friends Victoria, Australia

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## Caring For Surviving Children

These guidelines have been gathered from bereaved parents, surviving children and the writings of professional caregivers. Your child has feelings and symptoms of grief similar to those of an adult. He may also seem outwardly confused and defensive about death.

A surviving child is reacting to the loss of his sibling AND to the changed behaviour of his parents and others. Reassure him that the depth of a parent's grief does not lessen the love felt for him.

Be aware of your child's level of understanding or misunderstanding: a child of two or younger has the concept of "here" and "not here"; a child of 3-5 years sees death as temporary; at 6-10 years a child understands the reality of death and is curious about biological aspects of death and details of burial; from 11 on a child conceives of death in a manner similar to that of an adult.

Explain truthfully to your children, on a level they can understand, what caused the death of a sibling. Answer all questions simply, directly, giving answers to build on later, not ones that will have to be unlearned. Even a child of 2 or 3 can understand "his body could not work anymore."

The more a child understands, the less fearful he will be. Avoid euphemisms; they are easily misunderstood by children. Do NOT mix religious and medical causes. He was not taken because God wanted him in heaven. He died because his body could not work anymore. His body was buried in the ground.

Your surviving children had a close relationship with a dead sibling though the relationship may not have been loving. Remember, grief will exaggerate the positive and negative feelings between your children; encourage them to discuss these feelings. Children often feel guilty and/or responsible for their sibling's death. Reassure them that fighting and negative feelings between brothers and sisters are common and do not cause death.

Do not be afraid to show emotion with your surviving children—a controlled silence from parents is much more difficult for children to cope with than open distress. It will also confirm the feelings he has.

By your example in facing your own grief, show your children it is okay to cry, to be sad, to be angry, to laugh, to use that child's belongings or to forget at times. Do NOT isolate your child physically OR emotionally.

Your child's silence does NOT mean there are no feelings or questions: the moment may not be right. Talk openly with him or read a book with him—it may encourage him to open up. Listen carefully to what he says, as well as what he does not say.

Help your child develop a vocabulary to describe their feelings. It may be easier for them to talk to a person outside the family.

It is often easier for children to "mourn at a distance" - showing little emotion at a sibling's death but show tremendous empathy for characters in a movie or book or reacting strongly to a broken shoelace or lost toy.

Younger children may at first make jokes or continue normal play as a distraction; this is normal. Children, like adults, may temporarily regress emotionally and developmentally—tantrums, dependency, loss of manual skills, impaired learning ability, aggressive behaviour. BE PATIENT AND LOVING, NOT PUNISHING. They may need more touching and holding.

Temporarily assuming mannerisms or symptoms of a dead sibling or wearing his clothes are typical ways of dealing with the death. Share the belongings of your dead child with surviving brothers and sisters and friends. Perhaps each child would like something "for the moment" and something to carry into adulthood: a book, music, toy, clothes, photograph and jewellery. They may like to make their own memory box. Children of all ages may try to protect their parents. Encourage your child to find someone outside the family to share their emotions with.

Give your child alternatives for using his grief positively-drawing; writing letters, poetry, stories, diary; hammering; tennis; caring for plants.

Allow your child (even the very young) to participate in family rituals if he'd like: visiting the cemetery, making arrangements for the grave, contributing to a memorial fund. Use THEIR ideas of showing his love and his grief at anniversaries or special days.

There is a tendency to idealize the dead and parents should take care not to make comparisons that could lead to feelings of unworthiness in remaining children.

While it is difficult, parents should avoid being either overprotective or over-permissive. Try not to automatically assume that all upsets are related to their siblings' death.

Don't assume that your children's school - teachers, counsellors etc. know what has happened and is still happening. When your children have a change of teachers, ensure you speak with the new staff. Keep the school informed of anniversary dates and other extra stress times for your son or daughter.

Your children will continue to ask questions about their sibling's death at each new level of understanding.

Be open to their questions, seek advice if necessary.