

HELPING YOUR OTHER CHILDREN GRIEVE

What can you do to help your other children walk their grief path and emerge more resilient and stronger than before when you are feeling so devastated yourself? Indeed, your other children will be suffering a double loss. Their brother or sister has died and you and your partner are grieving, which will likely and understandably make it very difficult for you to comfort them. Luckily, children are often remarkably resilient and can surprise us with their powers of recovery with just a little support from the adults around them.

Just as Explain, Involve, and Understand were the three key words to help your other children when your child was sick, they remain the three key words to help your other children after your child has died. The words are close to what adolescent bereaved siblings recommended as helpful for health providers to know about their bereavement.

Can you explain that when grown-ups or children have lost someone they love, they have many different feelings? Explain your own reactions whatever they may be— that as well as feeling sad, you also feel angry, irritable, tired, and unwilling to do very much. Explain how much you love them even though you now feel very sad. Expressing and showing sadness in front of your other children gives them permission to express sadness. However, unrestrained crying in their presence may be scary, particularly to young children, so if necessary, find a private space where you can cry freely. Otherwise, you run the risk that your other children may feel that comforting you takes precedence over their own feelings. Explain also that over time you hope you will all gradually feel better and you will together figure out ways to help that happen.

Explain your answers to the direct questions the siblings may have. “Is it all right to play with his toys?” “Is it all right to go into his room?” For example, you might say, “For now I want to leave things the way they are, but I’ll think about it again in a few weeks” (and remember to do so). Remember what you feel and think directly after your child’s death may not be what you feel and think in several months, so it is probably wise to delay making any major decisions for a while. If you are able later to share at least some of your child’s possessions with your other children, the toy may develop a special meaning for them, as Seamus’s story shows later in the chapter (p. 325). And if you do, try not to show that you are upset if they do not treat the possessions as carefully as you would like. If something is breakable and precious to you, you can always explain you are saving it and will give it to your other children when they are older.

They may ask, “What do I say when someone asks me how many brothers or sisters do I have?” You may want to explain how you have decided to answer the question “How many children do you have?” You can explain many parents and brothers and sisters find this a hard question. For some parents it feels untruthful and a betrayal of the child who died not to include him in the number they give. Other parents prefer not to get into the discussion that could occur if they have to explain their answer. Some will vary their answers with the context in which they are asked. You can explain to your other children there is no right or wrong answer, and you can ask them what answer they would be most comfortable giving.

Your other children may have unstated questions: “Is it all right to talk about him?” “Is it all right to talk about feelings about his death?” and will take their lead from what you do and say. What you do and say will dictate how open or closed conversations are likely to be as well as how their brother or sister continues to be remembered and talked about (or not talked about) in the family. For example, when his birthday approaches, you could explain that you are likely to feel very sad. You could also tell them what

you plan to do and see if they have ideas about what to do. It may be a chance to talk about memories of earlier birthdays. If you are able to have these more open conversations, your children are less likely to feel they are at fault for something they have done or said and will speak more freely. And as time goes on, it may even become more natural than painful to include references to your child who died in regular family conversations.

Involve your other children. We already talked about how your other children can be involved in their brother's or sister's illness and end-of-life care. They can also be involved in the wake and funeral. Young children can draw a picture or give a toy that will be put in your child's coffin. Older children can select other things that will go with him—a letter, a poem, a baseball that reflect who he was. They can also be asked if they would like particular jobs to do at the wake or funeral, like handing water around to people who come or standing by a photograph poster board if there is one and talking about the family photographs on it. It may be easier for them if they have a particular task to do. Some children may want to write something that they or an adult can read at the funeral. Younger children can be given choices whether and how they want to come to the wake and funeral. It is a good idea to have one adult close to a younger child who can take the child out if the child wants or needs to leave. If the casket will be open, you or someone else needs to tell the child how your child's body will look and what clothes he will be wearing. Involve friends and family to do special things with your other children that may both relieve you and also allow them some special time with and get support from people who are feeling less sad and overwhelmed than you are. It does seem that social support from others close to your children can help at this difficult time. Involve siblings if you plan events to honor your child. They can walk part of a marathon or help raise money for the team. They can help plan and work at a fund raising event.

Understand if your other children act out, are more aggressive, show off, are disobedient, get worse grades, want to be with friends, don't want to be with friends, don't want to leave the house, don't want to stay in the house, have tantrums, have nightmares or a hard time sleeping initially. Children express grief in many different ways, and telling them about how sad you are feeling and that you understand how upset everyone else in the family is too may give them permission to look at their own feelings more directly. Understand if they have health concerns and visit the nurse's office frequently in school. Their symptoms may mimic some of their brother's or sister's symptoms or be unrelated. Understand if you have strong reactions to their health complaints. Call their pediatrician with any questions. He will understand why you become easily worried. Understand if your children want to spend more time out of the house with friends. For now, your house may feel like a sad place.

Understand that at some level your other children may wonder if you love them as much as you loved your child who died. They may even feel guilty that they survived and their brother or sister did not. If they do not remember their sibling, either because they were too young or were born after their sibling died, they and their older brothers or sisters may be quite sensitive to feeling compared to him or her (whether or not that was your intention) or they may compare themselves to their sibling. This can lead a child to feel inferior to and unable to compete with their brother or sister who died, particularly if you have emphasized only his positive qualities. Sometimes admiration for an older unknown sibling can also have very positive effects, as Seamus's story that follows demonstrates. If you have only one remaining child, it will be hard for that child not to feel an extra burden of responsibility. It will also be quite difficult for you not to focus very hard on how that child is doing. All your other children may need and benefit from direct and indirect reassurance from you that you love them equally and are glad they are with you and for the way they are— which is not the same way their brother or sister was. And that is okay.