



Our surviving children

A nationwide organisation of bereaved parents and their families



OUR SURVIVING CHILDREN

When our child dies our entire world changes forever, our future plans and dreams are shattered, and our grief is overwhelming. For our surviving children to see us grappling to cope with what has happened and unable to change anything is very frightening: we are their parents who are supposed to fix and mend everything. As every death is different, so our reactions and coping mechanisms vary. The age of our surviving children will govern their ability to understand what has happened but the emotional turmoil will be felt by us all.

In our darkest moments our surviving children need us to reassure them, to love, protect and help them get through this devastating time. This can be extremely difficult for us as we ourselves are in shock and struggling to comprehend what has happened. However in helping our other children we are also taking the first steps in helping ourselves.

It is important for us to be honest and to avoid euphemisms that can confuse a child – the sibling who died is not asleep, nor was called home. Sometimes sentiments intended to help can be misinterpreted and cause confusion. Occasionally we may need to tell our child that we do not have any answers although some of us may have a religious faith that can guide our response to their questions.

We need to reassure them about many things: some bereaved children become fearful that they too may die, or that their parents may suddenly disappear. They may be confused by the phrase 'lost' and try to go in search of their dead brother or sister, or become very anxious about being lost themselves. Whatever the circumstances of their siblings' death, children might try to apportion blame just as adults do, especially if they overhear conversations with such thoughts expressed.

Babies and young children

Babies and very young children will have no concept of death and loss but they will react to the emotional turmoil of grief. Their usual routines may be affected and their behaviour may mirror the anxiety and sadness they perceive around them. There is now greater realisation that babies can suffer the long term effects of grief, especially in multiple births where one dies, such as twins where the surviving twin often feels "incomplete" and misses their other half. Young children may not be able to verbalise their feelings, but may show distress through weight loss, disturbed sleep patterns or crying for no obvious reason. We can offer reassurance through soft, comforting words and physical closeness.

Young children have a limited concept of death but no understanding of its permanence. As they attempt to understand what has happened, they may re-enact events in their play which others might find distressing. They may act out a death with their toys when they are playing. This is not morbid, simply a young child's way of trying to make sense of what they may have seen or heard. Small children have a short attention span and cannot sustain grief in the same way as adults and much older children. They may switch from crying for their brother or sister one minute to chasing around the garden the next. This is not disrespectful and we should try to avoid judgement and censure. Alternating play and sadness is a natural response in the very young.

Because young children see death as temporary, we may have to field the same questions repeatedly. It can be upsetting to go over facts frequently knowing that the same questions will be asked again later – "Is Tom coming home today?" or "Will I see Lucy tomorrow?" Children need this repetition because time concepts are hard to grasp and suddenly we find ourselves having to explain words like 'always' and 'never'.

Nursery and school can give children an opportunity to express their

feelings. Most children welcome the chance to talk privately to a trusted adult about their missing brother or sister. Books, stories, music and art can all be extremely helpful in exploring feelings of loss and grief especially in younger children who cannot yet verbalise their thoughts.

If children are used to being read to at bedtime, then careful selection of suitable stories should continue. Reading a story may be easier for some people than talking to a grieving child, and a good way to share thoughts and feelings. Picture books are useful for the very young. School and public libraries can be helpful in finding appropriate literature for children of any age.

Bedtime routines may be affected if children are feeling fearful and simple things like leaving a night light on and doors open can help allay their anxieties.

Older children and teenagers

Older children are more likely to have a deeper understanding of death and may have already formed their own beliefs around it. They may show an interest in the physical details and have questions around burials or cremations. They may already have had some experience of death; this could have been a pet or an older family member. This will have given them some exposure to mourning although losing a sibling is very different.

Older children and teenagers face difficult and uncertain times as they approach maturity even without a death in the family. There are conflicting emotions and raging hormones to contend with. Their world has now changed forever, their self confidence may have vanished and they feel anxious. Some may regress and behave as they did in earlier happier times, others may become withdrawn and keep their emotions buried deeply within. Denial is a form of temporary self protection. Often siblings feel at ease only with their closest friends even though these friends may themselves have little experience of bereavement. The death of their brother or sister can

be profoundly disturbing leading them to question everything. As our children grow older their friends become increasingly important. Some of our surviving children are lucky and receive invaluable support from friends. This can be made easier through social media although the internet has its pitfalls.

Our surviving children are themselves mourning and this may not be adequately acknowledged by other family members and friends who direct their attention mainly at us, the bereaved parents. They might feel they have to fulfil their own role as well as that of their dead sibling, trying to be two people, adopting some or all of the habits and interests of their dead brother or sister. Alternatively they may be frustrated at what they perceive as the idealisation of the dead child, whose virtues are extolled and whose less attractive qualities seem forgotten.

At a time when everything is bewildering our surviving children find that their place in the new family structure is different. For the first time they may now be the oldest child or the youngest, possibly the only child. Their changed status may lead to new anxieties or responsibilities. They could feel very isolated and alone. Older children may feel they should look after their younger surviving siblings after the death of a brother or sister and this can be an important aspect of comfort and help for everyone. It can seem as if the roles of parent and child are reversed for a while. It is important that balance is reached and that all family members come to recognise their own limits. Sometimes a child takes on too much in supporting others at the expense of coping with their own grief, which can resurface later. It can also be the root of future resentments.

The pressures of exams can add to the difficulties faced by grieving families. This will apply to primary school children preparing for tests as well as teenagers and young adults facing exams to determine future career pathways and opportunities. Concentration, memory, confidence and self esteem can all be badly affected and so encouragement and understanding are even more necessary. Good

communications with teachers, lecturers and other professionals at this time could be helpful in the circumstances. Although it can be difficult, it is very important that we as parents try to set realistic boundaries without becoming over protective or too permissive. Routines should be continued wherever possible. This is not easy in a grieving household where exhaustion is commonplace. We do need to try and avoid damaging remarks and comments and the apportioning of blame.

This is made even more difficult when there are emotions of anger and frustration bubbling over. People of all ages sometimes temporarily regress emotionally and developmentally. They may throw tantrums and behave out of character but, however hard, we should try and address these problems with love and patience.

Supporting our children

Children's reactions can vary but may well include some or all of the following and they should be reassured that it is normal to act this way:

- Crying and feeling sad
- Trying to emulate their sibling
- Regressing to a younger happier version of themselves
- Living in the past to keep memories alive
- Struggling to forgive themselves for things like being mean or fighting with their dead sibling
- Not wanting to go on living
- Feeling lonely and isolated
- Experiencing feelings of anger, guilt or frustration
- Not wanting to talk about their sibling
- Feeling fearful that something bad will happen to other loved ones or themselves
- Wanting attention

As parents we do need to watch out for signs that our surviving children may be reacting to their grief in ways that are unhealthy or

destructive. Unfortunately some young people do show extreme responses to their grief. They may seek to anaesthetise their pain through activities such as self harm, alcohol or substance abuse. Others may experiment with sex, seeking close physical contact and intimacy. Some may hurt others, acting out of anger in response to the pain they themselves feel. A few may harbour thoughts of suicide particularly if their sibling has taken their own life. Parents need to remain vigilant and raise any concerns with school staff and professionals. Where children's behaviour changes dramatically after bereavement, they need help and support not criticism and punishment. Hopefully these extreme reactions will dissipate in time.

Leaving home can be especially difficult in the aftermath of bereavement. Parents may find it hard to let go, and the surviving child may worry about their parents coping without them. Communication is all important and it helps to share and acknowledge each other's feelings. We should recognise that having lost a child we as parents may be over protective or controlling of our remaining children. This can impact on our responses to their normal age appropriate activities.

Where one of our surviving children has learning difficulties we may have tried to shield them from some aspects of life. With the death of their brother or sister, we have to ensure that they are included fully in the grieving process of our family. We cannot assure them that everything is all right because it is not. We will be able to judge the level of words that we can use and how best to communicate our feelings and share our thoughts. The worst thing for our children is for them to feel excluded in some way.

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Our family unit has been altered forever. There is a void which can never be filled. Doing and making things together can be therapeutic. Some families make a memory book or memory box together, which can be a lasting treasure as well as a source of present comfort. Drawings, letters, post cards, photographs and possibly newspaper or magazine cuttings will be triggers for recollection in years to come. The family may wish to create a memorial of some kind, either digital or physical or both. Where there are any memorials or ongoing commemorative events for our dead child, it is very important that our surviving children are given the opportunity to participate; that we value and listen to their opinions and wishes. Sometimes family members choose to remember their sibling through fundraising, or raising awareness. As parents we want to provide opportunities for our children to express their grief although we should appreciate that their ways may be different from ours.

Our surviving children may find that talking to other bereaved siblings can be a great help, not only immediately after a death, but also at any time in the future. The quarterly newsletter **Support in Bereavement for Brothers and Sisters (SIBBS)**, published by The Compassionate Friends, is written especially by and for people over 18 years old who have lost a brother or a sister, and there is also the leaflet ***A Sibling's Grief for Young Adults***. The aims are to share information, reduce isolation and offer mutual support and reassurance.

Other considerations

With the death of our child decisions have to be made about whether surviving children attend the funeral service as well as any planned memorial ceremonies later. This will to a large extent depend upon the age of the children. Religious and cultural considerations may dictate who attends. Where appropriate it can be helpful for children to attend so that they can say goodbye.

Depending on the circumstances our family may have to contend

with other formalities around our child's death; maybe a police investigation and an inquest will be necessary. It is important that our surviving children are informed where possible of what is happening in age appropriate language, and are given the choice of being present at any necessary future proceedings. We must also be aware that they may choose to distance themselves from these and not want to attend.

It is possible that the death of our child prompts a lot of activity on social media sites especially if they had a Facebook page or similar. This can allow friends to pay their respects in a very public way which may be a great source of comfort to surviving family members. Sadly it may also attract attention that is less welcome as there are perverse people who deliberately target the vulnerable via the internet. Parents should be aware and encourage surviving children to talk about any unwanted internet communications.

The future

As parents, we will remember and mourn our dead son or daughter for the rest of our lives. It is important that we continue to talk about our son or daughter in the family. Many of us feel profound concern that we were too disabled by our own grief to see and respond to our other children at the time. It is never too late to say "I'm sorry, I didn't understand". For younger children, this sharing is important as they mature; we can explain why things happened, and have a chance to correct any misunderstandings or gaps in their factual knowledge of events. We should bear in mind that as our surviving children mature they will have a deeper insight into the tragedy and may require more detailed explanations.

Life will always be bitter sweet as someone very dear is missing from the future we should have shared. Somehow we have to make that future happen for all of us in ways that honour and recognise that our dead child lived and was deeply loved, whilst celebrating our surviving and equally loved children's milestones and achievements. It is important

for us to encourage them to live the life they dream of and not try and hold them back through fear. There will be occasions coloured by sadness in the future – significant birthdays, weddings, christenings, graduations to name a few. Over time we will all be more able to embrace these happy occasions and smile and be glad.

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### **Where can I go from here?**

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) was founded in 1969 by a hospital chaplain and a group of bereaved parents who recognised the lack of support and understanding they were receiving from those who had not suffered in this way. This leaflet aims to share the experiences of all of us bereaved parents and most especially those aspects which came upon us so suddenly and, sometimes, with no warning.

The reading of this leaflet may be your first real contact with TCF. We hope it has given you a little comfort, perhaps showing you that your pain and worries are shared by others. TCF publishes over 30 leaflets, on different aspects of grief which follow the death of a child. All of them are available at no charge to bereaved parents and siblings (but a small donation is, of course, always welcome).

If you would like to hear more about our work you could ring our Helpline, number on back page of this leaflet, and you will be able to talk to one of our volunteers, all of them bereaved parents. He or she could give you the number of a Local Contact and details of any Local Group which may meet regularly in your area. You could also find out from them details of our occasional Retreats, when a small number of bereaved parents meet and talk in peaceful surroundings. Most years there is a weekend **Gathering**, to which all members are invited.

Our website at **[www.tcf.org.uk](http://www.tcf.org.uk)** has more information about our services, Facebook page, and support forum where bereaved parents can 'talk' online. A quarterly journal, **Compassion**, is also produced, containing articles and poems written by our members about their own experiences. Those who wish for further reading can borrow from our **Postal Library** .

For general enquiries, and details of how to become a member of TCF, please contact the office (details overleaf).

The Compassionate Friends

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### **TCF Postal Library**

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