



The  
Compassionate  
Friends

## Our Surviving Children

A nationwide organisation of bereaved parents and their families offering support after a child dies.

# Our Surviving Children

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When our child dies our entire world changes forever, our lives are shattered and our grief is overwhelming. Somehow we must continue parenting our surviving children and step-children, whilst also allowing ourselves to grieve.

**We may be unable to show our love in the same ways as before, or could become overprotective. We might lack the emotional reserves to support our children through their grief. It is important to allow others to help us support them; we are critical to their healing, but need not be the sole provider of comfort. Our children could be frightened by the depth of our grief, and the realisation that we cannot sort out everything. Their reactions and coping mechanisms may be very different to our own. The age, developmental stage and personality of each of our surviving children will impact on their ability to understand what has happened and how they cope with it.**

## A child's grief

Our children need the opportunity to experience and express their feelings of grief, including sadness, anger, relief and confusion. They need support and encouragement to understand what happened, identify their feelings, release their emotions and embrace their sibling's memory.

Children's reactions can vary but may well include some of the following physical, behavioural, emotional and social responses:

- Crying and feeling sad
- Withdrawing and becoming very quiet
- 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

- Blaming themselves for their sibling's death
- Feeling lonely and isolated
- Not wanting to talk about their sibling
- Wanting attention
- Our children might become overachievers in an attempt to overcome feelings of helplessness
- Feeling fearful that something bad will happen to other loved ones or themselves is common. We need to listen to our children's fears and acknowledge that they are experiencing very difficult feelings
- Different kinds of anger can be expressed during grieving. There may be unresolved issues between a child and their sibling who died, which can leave the child feeling angry. They may be angry about the injustice of their loss. Anger can also be an expression of fear
- Our children may show displays of power, and these may take the form of bad behaviour, acting out, anger or belligerence
- Sadness can be an expression of a child's feelings of vulnerability as they continue to live without their sibling. Loving arms around a child or teen who cries with sorrow can offer safety and acceptance in a world that includes the death of those we love.

## Ages and developmental stages

All of the above describe generally how a child may react, but naturally there are vast differences depending on their ages and emotional development. As our children grow up and enter new developmental stages, they are likely to re-visit their grief with new understanding.

### **Babies and young children**

Infants and toddlers do grieve. If their sibling was older and had consistently been present in a baby's life before their death, our child will have a sense of something missing, regardless of their age, and an awareness of the sad atmosphere in the household. There is now a greater realisation that even babies can suffer the long-term effects of grief, including in multiple births where one child dies.

Infants and toddlers may not be able to express their feelings verbally, but may show distress through behaviour such as not feeding well,

disturbed sleep patterns or crying for no obvious reason. We can offer reassurance through soft, comforting words and physical closeness.

Young children do not understand the concept of death nor that it is permanent, but they do react to the emotional turmoil of grief as well as to the disruption of daily routines. We should try to keep to our usual routines as much as possible. Sticking to what we usually do will help to give our child a sense of safety and that everything is okay. Maintaining our usual levels of discipline will help children to feel secure.

Bedtime routines may be affected if children are feeling fearful. Simple things like having a night light on and doors open can help allay their anxieties. If children are used to a story at bedtime, then careful selection of suitable stories should continue. 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.

## **Children under the age of 12**

As children reach the ages of 5 to 7 years, they begin to grasp the concept and permanence of death, and they may be curious about the details. They may also become concerned about practical issues such as how the death of their brother or sister this will affect their lives.

Older children are ready for more information, but we should remember that this is a crucial time of development. A “tween” has one foot in childhood and one in adolescence. Even without grief and loss, this developmental stage is both an exciting and scary time for some children.

Creating opportunities for them to talk about their feelings can be a good step. Giving our children photographs and some of their sibling’s clothing or toys can also support the grieving process. We can allow them to choose the items they want, and what they want to do with them.

## **Teenagers**

Some issues relating to older children overlap with teenagers, and vice versa.

Teenagers experience hormonal changes and mood swings that may be intensified during grief.

We can encourage teens to express what the grief experience is like for them. We should let our child know that we are there to listen whenever

they would like to talk, and we can further help by affirming that their experience is likely to be different from others in the family.

If they prefer not to talk, we can suggest other outlets such as writing in a journal, on a blog, art, photography, sports or through music. They may want to create an online memorial or connect with peers grieving a similar loss.

It's important that teenagers have some say in how they memorialise the person who died and how they express their feelings. Often teens are feeling a loss of control, and regaining it - even in a small way - is important.

Often siblings feel at ease only with their closest friends even though these friends may themselves have little experience of bereavement. The bereaved child may appreciate the chance to escape into normality with trusted friends. Eventually, they may find that talking to other bereaved siblings can be a great help. x

For a more detailed description of how children and teenagers grieve, see **[childbereavementuk.org/supporting-bereaved-children-and-young-people](http://childbereavementuk.org/supporting-bereaved-children-and-young-people)**

## Some issues we will have to face whatever the ages of our surviving children

### **The funeral and the aftermath**

We will need to make decisions about whether our children should attend the funeral service as well as any planned memorial ceremonies later. Religious and cultural considerations may be a factor, along with our child's age.

If we are able to offer our child a choice as to whether to take part or not, we should be careful to explain what will take place, so this is not left to their imagination.

Saying goodbye at a funeral, the wake or memorial service can be comforting, and our child's participation, if we have judged it appropriate, can be helpful for them as they go forward.

For more on this subject, please see the TCF Leaflet *Preparing Our Child's Funeral*.

## **Our children's place in our family**

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 or the youngest child or 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.

Our surviving children are 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 deceased brother or sister. Alternatively they may be frustrated at what they perceive as the idealisation of the deceased child, whose virtues are praised and whose less attractive qualities seem forgotten.

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.

## Children with learning difficulties

Where one of our 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.

## Our children's education

**We may wish to tell any adults our children come into contact with**, such as their teachers, about the death of their sibling. This will help them to understand if our child is behaving out of character and be ready to respond. Our children may talk to their teachers about the situation, so it is important the teacher knows how the loss of their sibling was explained. Our children may be vulnerable to bullying, especially if their sibling's death has been in the news, and it could help if their teachers are aware of this.

**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 by grief, 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.

## Other ways of supporting our children

**It is important for us to be honest.** Children have a much greater capacity to deal with the truth than many adults realise; it is the unsaid and the untruthful that they struggle with. Our children may not fully understand what has happened, but will certainly pick up on our distress and be very aware that things are "not right." A simple explanation as to why we are upset will reassure our children that we are okay but feeling very sad, because that is how people are when someone dies. Being available to our children, letting them see our emotions and how we manage them can help.

**Euphemisms can confuse our children and cause anxiety.** For example, our children may seek out their sibling who is “lost,” or could become afraid at bedtime if they are told their sibling “went to sleep.” Our children may blame themselves or others for their sibling’s death. They may become fearful that they or their parents will also die. Our children will need clear explanations and reassurance to help them cope with these things. If we do not have all the answers it is fine to say so. Our religious faith may guide our responses to our children’s questions.

Depending on the circumstances of our child’s death, **we may have to contend with formalities**, such as a police investigation and/or an inquest, or media attention. It is important that our surviving children are informed where possible of what happened to their sibling, in age appropriate language. It is quite possible they will hear something about it via social media or amongst friends, and it is far better that we would have already told them ourselves.

**Social media** is an environment where friends and family can 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 some internet users deliberately target the vulnerable. We should be aware and encourage our children to tell us about any unwanted internet communications.

It is natural that **the running of our household and the rhythm of our daily lives** has been disrupted by the loss of our child. For the sake of our surviving children, we will want to try to **regain some normality**. Behaviour problems are not uncommon at this time. 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.

**Our children need the right support to find healthy mechanisms to cope with their grief.** As parents we need to watch out for signs that they are 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 numb their pain through activities such as self harm, alcohol or substance misuse. Others may experiment with sex, seeking close physical contact and intimacy. Some may hurt others, acting out of anger. A few may think about suicide, particularly if their sibling has taken their own life. We need to remain vigilant and raise any concerns with school staff and health professionals.



**Leaving home** can be another difficult issue in the aftermath of bereavement. We may find it hard to let go, and the surviving child may worry about us 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.

## Useful links

Child Bereavement UK publishes information on supporting a child after a death in the family, including leaflets with suggestions for how to explain death to children of different ages.

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. There is also a TCF leaflet *A Sibling's Grief*. The SIBBS group organises some events and has a Facebook page. The aims are to share information, reduce isolation and offer mutual support and reassurance.

## The future

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 of our child's death. 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.

**Our love for our child endures beyond their death. We will remember and mourn our child for the rest of our lives. Life will always be bitter sweet as someone very dear is missing from the future we should have shared.**

**Somehow we have to make a different future happen for all of us in ways that honour and recognise that our deceased 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. There will be occasions coloured by sadness in the future – significant birthdays, weddings, christenings, and graduations to name a few. Over time we will learn to embrace these happy occasions, smile and be glad.**

## Who are the Compassionate Friends?

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. 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 40 leaflets, on different aspects of grief which follow the death of a child. All of them are available at no charge to bereaved families.

For further support and to talk to one of our volunteers call our Helpline on **0345 123 2304**. Our website at **[tcf.org.uk](http://tcf.org.uk)** has more information about our services.



# The Compassionate Friends

UK Helpline:

**0345 123 2304**

## **General Enquiries**

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## **TCF Library**

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To find out more about TCF visit

**[www.tcf.org.uk](http://www.tcf.org.uk)**

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**t** [@TCFcharityUK](https://twitter.com/TCFcharityUK)

**@** [@thecompassionatefriendsuk](https://www.instagram.com/thecompassionatefriendsuk)

David John McLarrie  
our darling red headed boy.  
To every thing there is a season  
and a time to every purpose under heaven.

**Founder: The Revd Canon Dr Simon Stephens OBE**

**President: The Countess Mountbatten of Burma**