



COPING MECHANISMS FOR GRIEVING SIBLINGS

It may be hard for remaining children to talk about emotions to their parents. The remaining children usually do not want to upset their parents. Furthermore, older children and adolescents often feel that their friends won't understand them, which can make them feel even more isolated. Allow them to seek out a sympathetic listener in a relative, teacher, counselor, or minister/rabbi. Such a "safe" adult acts as a neutral third party, and gives the children permission to voice their anger, fears, and disappointments without reproach or being talked out of such feelings.



Holden and Hayden Reamy

Parents can encourage remaining siblings to find an emotional outlet for their grief. Parents are often concerned that their children don't want to talk. Activities such as journal writing, prayer, poetry, sports, music and art are positive outlets for the feelings of remaining siblings. Children often express in pictures what they cannot express in words. One example of an art therapy and activity book for children aged 4 through 12 years is *Help Me Say Goodbye: Activities for Helping Kids Cope When a Special Person Dies* by Janis Silverman (Fairview Press, 1999). Another book specifically designed for older children aged 9-12 years, is *Good Grief for Children* by Katherine Dorn Zotovich (Journalkeepers Publishing, 2000). This activity book is designed to assist children in coping with their

grief through writing as well as drawing.

Grieving will continue over the years. Children grieve differently than adults. They grieve sporadically and they will grieve again through adolescence. Each stage of cognitive development can bring a different level of awareness of the sibling's illness and death. New questions, concerns, and observations may arise years later. Each child also has his or her own timetable for grief. They grieve the loss again whenever the person who died would have been present for special occasions.

It may be helpful to allow your children opportunities to acknowledge the death of their sibling. Many parents have the siblings participate in family rituals such as visiting the cemetery or by contributing to a memorial fund in honor of anniversaries or other special days.

Finally, find a way to acknowledge that the remaining sibling has also suffered a significant loss. Some parents allow the sibling to choose something belonging to the affected child that they can later carry into adulthood: a shared book, a favorite toy or stuffed animal, an article of clothing, or even a piece of jewelry.



Jack and Emma Zimmerman

This treasured belonging is a tangible reminder of their special relationship within the family.



Vincey Cassady and cousins

Sibling to Sibling, Heart to Heart

Finding another bereaved brother or sister and sharing their feelings can also be an outlet for surviving children. Adolescents especially may want to seek comfort from their peers. Some pediatric hospices and hospitals offer grief support groups specifically for surviving siblings. There are over 120 grief support programs that provide peer counseling for surviving siblings (ages 3-18 years old) based on the model of the Dougy Center for Grieving Children in Portland, Oregon. See their web site for a program in your state at www.grievingchild.org or call the Dougy Center at 503-775-5683.

Siblings can also try pen pal programs. The Compassionate Friends, an international organization for bereaved parents, offers a Sibling Pen Pal Program for kids of any age wishing to meet other siblings with similar interests, hobbies and whose sibling may have had a similar cause of death.

The Compassionate Friends also runs a Chat Room for adult and teen siblings. Visit the web site for Compassionate Friends for more information at www.compassionatefriends.org, or call them toll-free at 877-969-0010.