



FAMILY CORNER

SURVIVING SIBLINGS

by Akari Yamada

Children grieve in many ways. There is no right way to guide them through the grieving process. As a parent, it is difficult to watch a surviving sibling go through the intense and often turbulent grief process.

In the period immediately surrounding the death, give your remaining children your time and attention. They need the opportunity to ask questions and express their feelings. You don't have to talk about death or dying. Doing something together like going for a walk is a form of comfort. Children are reassured by this kind of special attention.

In the first days following the death of our affected child, we may eat less, sleep less, and feel paralyzed. You may have to force yourself to move. Keep in mind that your surviving children

model your behavior. Try to show them that you are able to take care of their needs and that life does go on after a death despite pain, stress, and sadness.

Children tend to express their grief and emotions through their body language and behavior. Keep an eye on your children. Observe them when playing and interacting with others. Listen when they sing or talk to themselves. This will help you to be more aware of what they are thinking and feeling.

Younger children who are left behind will exhibit a wide range of behavior. They may alternate between crying and playing normally. They may temporarily regress and have tantrums, withdrawal, dependency, impaired learning ability, or aggressive behavior. Try to be patient with them. Surviving siblings may also need more reassurance



Madison and DJ Yang

that you love them despite your changed behavior due to your own grief.

Grief can exaggerate the negative as well as positive feelings between your children. A remaining sibling often feels guilty about surviving. He may feel guilty when he is happy or having fun. He may feel guilty when he remembers past jealousy or anger toward the affected child. Reassure him that fighting between brothers and sisters is common. A surviving sibling may feel relieved that he is no longer responsible for taking care of his affected sibling. Sometimes, he may even feel some responsibility for his sibling's death. He may imagine that something he did or did not do lead to death. He needs to be reassured that the death was not due to his actions or inaction. Encourage a remaining child to discuss all of his feelings.

READING LIST FOR KIDS

Here is a list of books that can help you introduce young children (ages 4-8 years) to the concept of death. These books (*) are available to Parent Peer Group members. You can borrow them from the NTSAD Lending Library maintained by the national office.

NON-FICTION:

- Marc Brown, *When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death*, 1998
- Brian Mellonie, *Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children*, 1987
- Michaelene Mundy, *Sad Isn't Bad: A Good-Grief Guidebook for Kids Dealing with Loss*, 1998
- Jack Simon, *This Book Is For All Kids, But Especially My Sister, Libby. Libby Died*, 2000

FICTION:

- Lynn Bennett Blackburn, *Timothy Duck*
- Margaret Wise Brown, *The Dead Bird* (*)
- Leo Buscaglia, *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf* (*)
- Lucille Clifton, *Everett Anderson's Goodbye* (won the Coretta Scott King Award)
- Simon Puttock, *A Story for Hippo: a Book about Loss*
- Doris Stickney, *Waterbugs and Dragonflies: Explaining Death to Young Children*
- Susan Varley, *Badger's Parting Gifts* (*)
- Judith Viorst, *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney*
- Charlotte Zolotow, *When the Wind Stops*

REACTIONS TO DEATH

When you live with illness on a daily basis, it is difficult to shelter the siblings of an affected child from the reality of his inevitable death. Parents stress that it is important to be truthful about what will cause the death of their sibling. They recommend giving simple and direct answers that are appropriate for the child's level of understanding. Even a 3-year old can understand that "his body will not work anymore."

Be aware of your child's level of under-

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standing or misunderstanding about death. Here are some common reactions of children at different ages.

Under 2 years old: A toddler is aware when you are sad or absent-minded. They may be anxious if they are separated from you for long periods of time. They may want you to stay close to them.

Preschool (3-5 year old): Death is viewed as a temporary state. Many kids think of the deceased as sleeping and wait for him to wake up. They may search the house for their "missing" sibling. A preschooler has a limited conception of time, so he may even ask when his sibling is coming back.

6-7 year old: Kids understand that death is permanent by this age. They understand the difference between fantasy and reality, but they may search for their sibling just to reassure themselves that it is a fact. They may seem obsessive about knowing the details of death and will talk frequently about their deceased sibling. They believe in magic and may create formulas or rituals to prevent the same illness from happening to them. They need

to be reassured repeatedly that they do not share the same illness.

7-10 year old: This child is concerned with change and may seek reassurance about the future. He may test limits with more aggressive behavior to see what is going to stay the same. School emphasizes concrete abilities and logical conclusions in children at this age. He may also be concerned with his own mortality. He may ask detailed questions about why and how their sibling died because it makes him feel more in control. The surviving child may be struck by the unfairness of the fact that his sibling will never grow up like his friends.

11-13 year old: A preteen can seem nonchalant but he is acutely aware of his own mortality. Outwardly, he may deny that the death has changed his life or say he doesn't care as a defense mechanism. He may also rebel against you if he feels you are being overprotective. Sometimes, grieving preteens have tremendous mood swings. He can be very angry and act out his frustrations. Preteens depend a lot on their peers and can be especially hurt if friends or schoolmates do not call, send cards, or visit.

Recommended Reading for Parents

There are many books for parents on coping with the loss of a child. Here is a short list of recommended reading for parents which contains information specific to surviving siblings.

- Earl A. Grollman. *Talking About Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child*, 1990
- Earl A. Grollman (ed.). *Bereaved Children and Teens: A Support Guide for Parents and Professionals*, 1995
- Theresa Huntley. *Helping Children Grieve: When Someone They Love Dies*, 1991
- William C. Kroen. *Helping Children Cope with the Loss of a Loved One*, 1996
- Barbara D Rosof. *The Worst Loss: How Families Heal from the Death of a Child*, 1994
- Juliet Cassuto Rothman. *The Bereaved Parent's Survival Guide*, 1997
- The Dougy Center Staff (ed.). *35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child*. 1999

Lifeline is always interested in hearing from siblings. Send us your thoughts, ideas, or artwork.

When I was six I first found out that Nicole had Tay-Sachs. Life with her was fun. I sometimes read to her in her special chair. I could tell her secrets and she wouldn't tell anyone. When she died on February 21st, I was sad. Life without Nicole is different. There are some things now that are good. Like now my mom could go on field trips with Amy and me. Everyone who has lost a sister or a brother to Tay-Sachs or other diseases has to know that it's not your fault. I miss Nicole and now she is an angel. I will see her again when I get to be an angel.

Robert Hunter, age 10



I was five when I first learned that Nicole had a disease. Life was great. I used to read Dr. Seuss's books to her in her special chair. My mom used to always say "You want to spend as much time with Nicole as you can because when she dies you'll wish you had." She was right! On February 21, 2001, Nicole died. Life was different. For example, now my Mom can come to Robert's and my field trips. I really miss Nicole, but I know that when I die I'll get to see her again.

Amy Hunter, age 9