

Supporting children when a sibling dies

The death of a sibling is a profound loss for any child. You know your child best so will have the best sense of how they are likely to respond to this loss and what support they will need. The following information may give some guidelines you can adapt for your particular child and relationship. Acknowledging the grief of a sibling and giving them the opportunity to express their feelings is important in helping them manage their grief and feel connected to their sibling.

Giving difficult news

Talking to a child about serious illness or death is never easy. There's no single 'right' way to have these conversations. What matters most is being honest, present, and 'good enough' for your child's age and level of understanding.

Creating the right environment to give difficult news

- Choose a quiet, safe space with no distractions (turn off phones and the TV).
- Try to be at home or in a familiar place where your child feels secure.
- Have something nearby to help express feelings – for example, a teddy to cuddle or a ball to kick.
- Doing something together, such as drawing or walking, can make it easier to talk.
- Avoid conversations at bedtime.

How to approach the conversation

- Speak calmly and simply. Use clear words like dead and dying rather than softer terms like 'passed away' or 'gone to sleep' that might be confusing.
- Give the facts in a way your child can understand.

For a younger child you might say:

"Your sister has died. When someone dies, their body stops working. She doesn't need to eat or drink anymore, and she can't feel anything. Because her body has stopped working, she can't come back to life, even though we might really want her to."

For an older child:

"Your brother's body stopped working and he died. That means he won't be alive anymore. It's really sad, and it's okay to feel lots of different things right now"

- Allow silence and time for them to process what they've heard.
- Don't force them to talk – just reassure them you're there when they're ready.
- Listen as much as you talk.

Common reactions



Children may:

- Cry, get angry, or laugh – sometimes at unexpected times.
- Seem unaffected at first, then react later.
- Ask very direct or surprising questions.
- Worry that the death or illness was their fault – reassure them clearly that it was not.
- Worry they may catch the illness and the same thing will happen to them.
- Feel anxious about changes in routine. If you need to leave them, let them know when you'll be back or who will be caring for them.

All of these reactions are normal. Feelings may change often as children process their grief.

Scan the QR code to watch a video from Child Bereavement UK, on how children grieve and how you can support them.



Children's grief



Children's understanding of death and their reactions

A child's age and stage of development will affect how they understand death and how they express grief. Children under about five or six often don't fully understand that death is permanent or that it happens to all living things.

Be prepared to go over the facts as often as needed.

Children may:

- Become anxious about being apart from family.
- Have trouble sleeping or lose their appetite.
- Be restless or find it hard to concentrate at school.
- Move in and out of grief – sometimes very upset one moment and playing happily the next. This 'puddle jumping' is a normal way for children to cope.

Helping children express their feelings

- Let your child know it's okay to talk about the person who has died. Keep offering them opportunities to share their feelings.
- Children benefit from seeing adults express emotions too. You might say, *"I feel sad because they have died, and it's okay to feel sad sometimes and happy at other times."*
- Encourage play – it helps children make sense of their experiences.
- It is very common for children to want to protect the adults close to them from their emotions for fear of causing more upset. It can help to let children know who is there for them. A family friend, grandparent or another trusted adult outside the immediate family can sometimes be easier for them to talk to.

Some common feelings experienced by siblings in grief

- Guilt – a bereaved child may have a strong sense of guilt about the way they behaved towards the child who has died. You can reassure them that having arguments is a normal part of being a sibling and their death is not their fault.
- Relief – where there was lots of family disruption a child may feel relief that their sibling has died. Reassure them this is ok.

- Jealousy – children can feel jealous that their sibling who has died has so much of their parents' emotional energy. Talking to them about their feelings can help, as well as letting them know they are special to you and you love them just the same.
- Fear – children may worry they too might die or that someone else they love might die. It can help to talk about their worries. These can be hard conversations as you may also have similar worries. You can reassure them it is very unusual for people to die when they are children. Most people grow up to be adults.

Use play and stories

Reading, drawing, and storytelling can help children explore feelings and ask questions in a safe way. There are many excellent books and videos for children of all ages that talk about loss and grief.

Have a look on the Child Bereavement UK website for suggestions and links to animations that may help. Follow the link www.childbereavementuk.org/Listing/Category/children or scan the QR code. You can also speak to us.



Child Bereavement UK

Should children attend funerals?

It can be hard to know whether a child should attend a funeral. However, saying goodbye can be an important part of grieving for children as well as adults.

Where possible, involve your child in the decision, taking into account their age and understanding. Talk through what will happen at the funeral or cremation to help reduce fear and confusion, and make the experience less overwhelming.

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