



Supporting Siblings Workshop

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“When a child is bereaved we cannot and should not take away their grief. By helping them to explore it and share it, we can help them live through it and beyond”

Sands support of families and sibling bereavement in particular is different from that of other support organisations. Siblings are often very young when their baby brother or sister dies, or they may have been born into historical grief for a sibling who died before they were born.

Parents are having to manage their own feelings of profound grief and shock, whilst maintaining day to day life. Creating a safe space for siblings to grieve in can feel impossible.

“But I’m still here Mummy”

What feelings and thoughts do we have when thinking about a child's grief?

Finding the words is hard for adults. Helping children to find the words when they go back to school or in facing the world generally is vital.

- As adults we protect others from their response to our news
- Children cannot and should not be expected to do so
- How can we prepare them?

2-5 years

- Young children begin to understand the concept of death, but do not realise that it is permanent.
- They may need repeated explanations of what has happened, before moving on to other seemingly unrelated questions or conversations very quickly.
- You may find you feel anxious getting ready to tell them that the baby has died and then their response is brief and moves on to what might be for dinner, or if they can go back to playing.
- As their thinking is very much focussed on themselves and their world, they may need reassurance that nothing they did or said caused the death.
- It is also important that children of this age have a chance to understand why the baby died, as they may otherwise create fantasies and stories which may be much more frightening.
- Children may also make the baby an imaginary friend. You may find this unsettling even though it is a common way for children to cope with their loss.

5-8 years

- Children begin to understand the difference between being dead and being alive.
- Between 7 and 8 years old they start to understand the permanence of death.
- Separation anxiety may increase or return at this point.
- They may not ask questions but may be very interested in what is happening and why, so giving them the opportunity and time to ask questions is important.
- They may “play” funerals or act out scenarios where a death occurs to help them process what is happening. This can be a good opportunity for you to gauge their understanding and concerns. Try to respond in a calm way, even if their responses may feel unsettling for you.

8-12 years

- The understanding of children at this age is closer to that of an adult.
- They may find the abstract nature of faith or less concrete concepts hard to understand.
- They will need specific questions answering and find detail important.
- They may become more anxious about their own mortality and those around them. It is important to listen to and acknowledge their concerns, and to put them in a realistic context.
- It can help children to practise answering questions they may receive from other children, with information and language that they are comfortable using.

Teenagers

- Anxiety about a young person's own mortality and that of those close to them continues at this age. This combined with a natural need for independence may be a struggle.
- They can respond by engaging in an increasing amount of risk-taking behaviour and becoming angry more easily. This can be very hard for parents at a time when they may be feeling more anxious and protective of their other children.
- Questioning the meaning of life is an important part of this age and bereavement can have a significant impact on this process. This can sometimes result in depression.
- This age group may find it easier to talk to friends or a trusted adult rather than their parents. It can help to think about who this might be and support them via this person.
- Children in step families can feel very conflicted about their place in the family and may need more reassurance than usual.

Ways to involve children.....

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Books and Resources

<https://www.sands.org.uk/support/bereavement-support>

Thank you all!