



PalliativeCare  
AUSTRALIA

# Siblings and Grief

Pediatric  
Palliative Care

'Superhero Siblings' by Alex, 8 years old

# Siblings and Grief

*"People who love each other are always connected by a very special string, made of love. Even though you can't see it with your eyes, you can feel it deep in your heart, and know that you are always connected to the ones you love."*

— The Invisible String, Patrice Karst

Siblings have unique relationships with one another and how they grieve will also be unique. Siblings need their own time to grieve and a feeling of safety so they can express how they are feeling. It is important to remember children's grief can vary greatly from adults but if you have concerns it may be helpful to seek support from a health professional.

A brother or sister's reaction to the death of a sibling will be unique and is greatly influenced by their age, their development stage, personality and the family, cultural and religious influences in their lives. Understandably you will have concerns and worries about how your other children will manage their grief.

It may be worth remembering that a child's grief can vary greatly from adults. Many factors influence this, including age and developmental stage. The majority of children who experience loss will have three concerns.

- › Did I cause the death?
- › Will I die?
- › Who will care for me?

Speaking in an open, honest and age appropriate way with children can help them cope better with their loss. Encouraging and supporting them in planning and attending memorial services can further aid understanding of grief and associated feelings. Involvement of schools for ongoing support is a positive step towards learning to live with the emotions and changes imposed by loss. It may also be worth considering professional bereavement support.

## Common grief responses in children

### Common signs of grief in pre-school-aged children

Pre-school-aged children aged under 5 may:

- › be affected by emotions of those around them that they don't understand
- › grieve in doses, alternating between displaying grief and playing as if nothing has happened
- › have a matter-of-fact curiosity about death, asking confronting questions
- › become fussy, irritable, withdrawn, or show signs of insecurity
- › have distressing dreams and nightmares
- › experience restless sleep
- › have difficulty concentrating or making choices
- › feel guilty or responsible for their sibling's death
- › act or behave in ways that are younger than they are, e.g. bed wetting or clinging behaviour
- › feel bewildered and physically search for their loved one who has died



## Common signs of grief in primary-school-aged children

Children of primary school age between 6 to 12 may:

- › experience a difficult transition period, want to see death as reversible and believe death only happens to other people
- › be very curious about death and burial rituals and ask detailed questions
- › imagine death as a bogeyman or ghost
- › play games pretending to die
- › be angry over the death and focus their anger at certain people or at anyone involved with the death, e.g. doctors, parents or teachers
- › take time to absorb the reality of what has happened and might not appear to be immediately affected by the death
- › be quick to blame themselves
- › feel guilty that they survived when their sibling did not
- › experience disturbed sleep, decreased appetite, poor school performance or have physical reactions, e.g. headaches, stomach upsets
- › worry about who will look after them if a parent or other caregiver dies
- › take on a parenting role to younger siblings
- › 'act out' feelings rather than talk about them
- › be concerned about what their peers think and might be anxious about being seen as 'different'
- › feel isolated, because none of their peers has had a similar experience

## Helping children navigate their grief

### Listen and talk with them

Children need time and to feel safe in order to express how they are feeling. Be prepared to revisit conversations a number of times, as children need time to process information. Be patient, open, honest and consistent with your response. Reassure them that grief is normal and that it's okay to be upset about what has happened.

### Include them

Include children in decision-making when appropriate; for example, give your child the choice as to whether or not they would like to participate in the funeral or any other mourning rituals. Rather than making suggestions, speak with them about their ideas of ways they would like to remember their sibling.

### Provide safety and security

Death can threaten a child's sense of safety and control. It is vital that the child's physical and emotional needs are met to support them in adapting to the loss. Try to maintain routines and firm, but fair, boundaries as much as possible.

### Provide opportunities for expression

Many children respond well to creative outlets and there are a range of activities that you can do with children to encourage them to process and express their grief, including:

- › drawing and painting
- › reading and storytelling
- › writing poetry or letters to the person who has died
- › craft activities e.g. making a memory box or collage
- › music and dance



## Grief and Teenagers

It's difficult to bear witness to the pain of young people. As bystanders, we may want to take away or fix the pain of teenagers who are grieving and, as a result, we may try to avoid talking about the loss or the person who has died, modify information about their death, or try to accelerate the teenager through their grief. While these responses may ease our own discomfort, they can result in them concealing their grief, withdrawing from loved ones, or expressing their feelings in destructive ways.

### Grief is not always visible

Grief comprises the many thoughts and feelings experienced following a loss. As teenagers are in the process of becoming more independent of their parents and other central figures in their lives, they can feel reluctant to outwardly express their grief, as it reinforces a sense of dependence and vulnerability. Even so, all teenagers grieve when someone they love dies.

### Common grief responses in teenagers

Like adults, every teenager is different, however there are some common factors that may affect them.

Teenagers may:

- › grieve in doses, breaking up their grief into bearable amounts, however this can often manifest in intense outbursts
- › experience a multitude of emotions that can come and go in waves
- › feel guilty they were unable to save their sibling or guilty that they survived when their sibling did not
- › seem out of character and unpredictable
- › not want to talk about their grief
- › have problems sleeping, or oversleeping
- › feel alienated from their peers

Be aware of danger signs such as chronic depression, violence, drug and alcohol abuse or dramatic changes in personality, and seek professional support if necessary.

## Helping teenagers navigate their grief

### *Be available*

It is when we are truly listened to that we feel most understood. Provide teenagers with an accepting, open, communicative environment in which to grieve. Convey to them that it is okay to feel the emotions that they feel, and that you will be there for them if they want to talk.

### *Peer support*

Teenagers often look to their peers for support when times are tough. Encourage them to connect with their friends in a safe environment.

### *Talk about the loss*

Invite teenagers to talk about their loss and/or their sibling, however if they don't want to talk, you need to respect that. Let them know that you are available and ready to listen and check in from time to time to see if they would like to talk. When discussing the death and their grief, ask specific questions and answer their questions honestly and clearly. Don't tell half-truths, and if you don't know the answer to something, say so. Share your memories, thoughts and beliefs with them without pressuring them to adopt your perspective.

### *Model healthy grief*

Like all of us, teenagers learn from the behaviour they sense and observe. The more they observe healthy communication and the natural expression of feelings associated with loss, the more likely they will understand and accept the breadth of emotions they may be feeling. Be aware that your own grieving style may look very different to your teenager's. Finding out how they express their grief and reassuring them that it's okay to have different ways of grieving, will help them to feel more supported.

### *Support yourself*

You won't be in any position to provide support if you don't first take care of yourself, both physically and emotionally. If you are struggling, don't be afraid to ask for help, whether that be through family, friends or a health professional.

## When to Seek Help

With good information, love and support, children and teenagers can learn to understand and work through their grief. However, if you are concerned by their behaviour, or feel that they need more assistance than you can provide, please seek further help from a health professional.

## Support groups and further information

During this time you may feel a wide range of feelings, sadness, anger, regret, guilt, disbelief, fear and anguish — all of which are normal.

- › Your General Practitioner / Area Health Service will have bereavement support services available.
- › The Compassionate Friends is a world-wide self-help group for parents that have lost a child of any age and through any cause. They offer support and understanding.  
[thecompassionatefriends.org.au](http://thecompassionatefriends.org.au)
- › Bereavement Care Centre provides comprehensive and accessible counselling and support services for recently bereaved families.  
[childhoodgrief.org.au](http://childhoodgrief.org.au) • 1300 654 556
- › National Association for Loss and Grief (NALAG) provides free loss and grief support to those who are grieving, either face to face or via telephone.  
[nalag.org.au](http://nalag.org.au) • (02) 6882 9222
- › Red Nose (formerly SIDS and Kids) bereavement support services assist families who have experienced the sudden and unexpected death of a baby or child, during birth, pregnancy or infancy, regardless of the cause. Their support services are extensive and include counselling, parent and family support, peer support, sibling support, grandparent support groups, group activities, annual memorial services, telephone counselling and a national 24 hour free call bereavement support line.  
[rednosegriefandloss.com.au](http://rednosegriefandloss.com.au) • 1300 308 307
- › Lifeline provides access to a 24 hour crisis support and suicide prevention for anyone experiencing a personal crisis.  
[lifeline.org.au](http://lifeline.org.au) • 13 11 14
- › Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement provide information including a pamphlet — “After the Loss of a Child. A resource for parents of children in palliative care”.  
[www.grief.org.au](http://www.grief.org.au)
- › Headspace provides early intervention mental health services to 12 – 25 year olds.  
[headspace.org.au](http://headspace.org.au) • 1800 650 890 from 9am–1am
- › Cancer Council  
[cancercouncil.com.au](http://cancercouncil.com.au) • 13 11 20
- › Redkite provides information and emotional and financial support to parents who have lost children to cancer.  
[redkite.org.au](http://redkite.org.au) • 1800 733 548
- › Griefline provides a dedicated grief helpline service providing counselling support services free of charge.  
[griefline.org.au](http://griefline.org.au) • 1300 845 745 from 12pm–3am

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## Reading material

### Children

- › *Gentle Willow* by Joyce C Mills
- › *Badgers Parting Gift* by Susan Varley
- › *When Dinosaurs Die* by Laurie Krasny-Brown and Marc Brown
- › *Always and Forever* by Alan Durant
- › *No Matter What* by Debbi Gior
- › *Lifetimes* by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingen
- › *The Invisible String* by Patrice Karst
- › *What Does Dead Mean?* By Caroline Jay and Jenni Thomas
- › *The Next Place* by Warren Hanson
- › *Water Bugs and Dragonflies* by Doris Stickney
- › *The Lonely Tree* by Nicholas Halliday

### Teenagers

- › *Talking about Death* by Earl Grollman
- › *The Grieving Teen: a guide for teenagers and their friends* by Helen Fitzgerald
- › *Straight Talk about Death for Teenagers* by Earl Grollman
- › *Teenagers and Grief* by Doris Zagdanski
- › *The Empty Room* by Elizabeth DeVita-Raeburn
- › *Healing your grieving heart for teens* by Alan D Wolfelt
- › *Weird is normal when teenagers grieve* by Jenny Lee Wheeler

### Adults

- › *Coping with Grief* by Mal McKissock
- › *A broken heart still beats: after your child dies* by Anne McCracken and Mary Semell
- › *The Grief of our Children* by Dianne McKissock
- › *The Worst Loss – how families heal from the death of a child* by Barbara D Rosof
- › *Children Die Too* by Joy Johnson and Marvin Johnson
- › *An Intimate Loneliness: supporting bereaved parents and siblings* by Gordon Riches and Pam Dawson
- › *Shadows in the sun: The experiences of unspoken Grief: Coping with childhood sibling loss* by Helen Rosen
- › *Sibling bereavement in childhood* by Betty Davies

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