

When a Sibling Dies

Tips for supporting the children left behind

After the death of child many decisions need to be made, some fairly quickly. It can often be hard for grieving parents to navigate through them all, let alone consider the impacts to surviving siblings. The following ideas are based on the feedback of now adult siblings reflecting back on their childhood experiences.

Navigating Immediate Family decisions:

- **Viewing the Body** – Based on the age of siblings, allow them to decide if they want to view their sibling's body, preparing them for the experience by describing how the body will be different. Also allow them to choose which family members they want to go with them.
- **Sharing information** – Share age appropriate information about arrangements and next steps. Knowing what is going on allows them to feel more secure during a chaotic time. Allow them to provide ideas and feedback on arrangements as appropriate (you don't need to implement them, but this is their loss as well and feeling heard is critical)
- **Choosing toys and other items** – When it comes time to make decisions about the deceased child's toys and other possessions, after you've culled through items, don't forget to ask the surviving siblings if they'd like to select remaining items. You could be surprised at some of the small knickknacks that hold meaning for them. If they are young you may need to hold on to items for safekeeping until they are older.
- **Permission to play with remaining toys** – Toys and other belongings of siblings are often used communally. Unless the item has a special meaning and is being saved separately, make sure to pro-actively tell the surviving children they have permission to touch, handle, and play with items. Otherwise, they may feel it's taboo and dishonoring of their sibling's memory to do so.

Ideas to Consider:

- **Permission to still be a kid** – They are grieving, they are sad. And they are also still children. Give them permission to smile, laugh, and play. Verbally tell them it's okay and it's doesn't mean they aren't sad or grieving.
- **Professional help** – Your whole circle of family and friends is grieving on some level and the surviving children know this. An outside professional is someone they can talk to without worrying about burdening already grieving. They also get to have their own pain and story without concern for how someone else will take it.
- **One on one time with parents** – Give each sibling one on one time with a parent(s) to ask questions and process the situation. Also give them time to simply be and connect with you individually.
- **Adult Mentor** – Parents are shouldering so much grief and pain. Is there someone you know and trust who can step in as an adult mentor to your surviving child(ren)? Preferably this is someone your child already has a relationship with. It can be as simple as a standing monthly ice-cream date.
- **Play dates** – Make sure to give them opportunities to let loose and have fun! Ask a family friend, one with other children of similar age if possible, to take them out for an afternoon of play. The child(ren) is sad and often doesn't feel comfortable enjoying life...force it on them for a few hours.
- **Maintain stability and normalcy** – It may feel counter intuitive, but providing continuity and treating the remaining child(ren) as normal is important to demonstrating stability, which is what they desperately need. Still enforce family rules, don't let your family structure fall apart. Regular family dinners together are a great way for everyone to connect and feel normal.
- **Praise the siblings for a job well done** - You have no idea how much this means to them. Hearing it from their parents and other family and friends is so very meaningful! They feel seen, acknowledged, and honored for their role in their deceased sibling's life and as an individual going through the loss as well.