

Sibling Death and Childhood Traumatic Grief:

Information for Families

Introduction to Childhood Grief

Like adults, children and teens may feel intense sadness and loss, or *grief*, when a person close to them dies. And like adults, children and teens express their grief in how they behave, what they think and say, and how they feel emotionally and physically. **Each child grieves differently, and there is no right or wrong way or length of time to grieve.**

Some grief reactions cut across all age groups and developmental levels, and children may show their grief in many different ways. For example, grieving children or teens of any age may sleep or cry more than usual. They may regress and return to earlier behaviors, or they may develop new fears or problems in school. They may complain about aches and pains. They may be angry and irritable, or they may become withdrawn and isolate themselves from family and friends.

Bereaved children may also act in ways that those around them may not recognize as grief reactions. For example, a quiet toddler may have more tantrums, an active child may lose interest in things he or she used to do, or a studious teen may engage in risky behavior. Whatever a child's age, he or she may feel unrealistic guilt about having caused the death. Sometimes bereaved children take on adult responsibilities and worry about surviving family members and who would care for them if something happened to their caregivers.

Childhood Traumatic Grief

After someone important dies, some children and teens may experience greater than usual sadness and upset and have a more intense reaction known as *childhood traumatic grief*. In childhood traumatic grief, children develop symptoms associated with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Children may be more likely to experience traumatic grief if the death was sudden or traumatic, if it occurred under terrifying circumstances, or if the child witnessed or learned of horrific details surrounding the death. Also, although posttraumatic stress reactions may occur after someone has been killed suddenly, they may also occur when the death was expected (such as following a long illness or disabling injury).

Not all children who experience the death of someone special under traumatic circumstances develop traumatic grief. However, in some cases, children may develop symptoms that interfere with their ability to grieve and to have comforting memories of the person who died. Traumatic grief may also interfere with everyday activities such as being with friends and doing schoolwork. PTSD symptoms in children with traumatic grief can include:

- **Reliving aspects of the person's death** or having intrusive thoughts, for example, experiencing nightmares about the death, not being able to stop thinking about how the person died, imagining how much the person suffered, or imagining rescuing the person and reversing the outcome.
- **Avoiding reminders of the death or of the person who died**, for example, by avoiding pictures of the deceased person or by not visiting the cemetery, by not wanting to remember or talk about the person, or by feeling emotionally numb.
- **Increased arousal**, being nervous and jumpy or having trouble sleeping, having poor concentration, being irritable or angry, being "on alert," being easily startled, and developing new fears.

In general, if it becomes apparent that your child or teen is having very upsetting memories, avoiding activities or feelings, or experiencing physical, emotional, or learning problems, he or she may be having a traumatic grief reaction. (See **Table 1** for examples of common and traumatic grief reactions in children at various ages.)

You may wish to seek help or counseling for your child or teen if grief reactions seem to continue without any relief, if they appear for the first time after an initial period of relative calm, if they get worse, or if they interfere with your child's being with friends, going to school, or enjoying activities.

Grief and Sibling Death

The death of someone special can be very difficult and sad for a child or teen, but when it is a sibling who dies, the family faces a unique set of challenges. Siblings often have very complicated relationships. Sisters and brothers experience a range of sometimes conflicting feelings for each other—they may love and look up to one another, older siblings may feel responsible for, enjoy and/or resent caring for younger ones, or they may be jealous and fight—and their relationships can change over time.

When a sibling dies, these past relationships and feelings can affect the surviving child's grief and the family's bereavement process. Grieving siblings may show some or all of the following common reactions, and there are many ways in which parents and caregivers can help them cope.

- **Survivor's guilt about being alive.** This can stem from a sibling questioning why he or she was spared because they feel no better than—or even inferior to—the sibling who died.

Tip: Acknowledge that many siblings feel guilty, but correct inaccurate thoughts and information. Reassure the child that all children are different and unique, and that he or she is just as important and loved as the child who died. You should also pay attention to friends or family members' comments comparing a surviving sibling to the child who died. You should comfort your child and help others understand that this can be hurtful.

- **Regrets and guilt about previous “bad” behavior.** Surviving siblings may express regrets or remorse about things they did or said to the sibling who died. For example, they may think that they should have been nicer to or more patient with the sibling while he or she was still alive. Surviving children who fought with the deceased sibling or at times “wished” that he or she would disappear or die may believe that their own thoughts and feelings caused the death.

Tip: “Normalize” children's feelings by reassuring them that all brothers and sisters fight or disagree at times—that this is a natural part of sibling relationships. It may be helpful to explain what actually caused the sibling's death. Also, it is important to acknowledge surviving siblings' thoughts that they could have prevented the death, while also letting them know that they were not responsible. Explain that all children feel angry or have unkind thoughts about family members from time to time, but that feelings or wishes cannot cause a death to happen.

Table 1. Children’s Understanding of Death and Reactions to Grief

Age	Understanding of death	Common grief reactions	Traumatic grief reactions
<p>Preschool and young children</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do not understand that death is final. May think that they will see the person again or that the person can come back to life. May think it was their fault that the person died. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May become upset when their routines change. May get worried or fussy when apart from their usual caregivers and may be clingy and want extra attention. May express fears, sadness, and confusion by having nightmares or tantrums, being withdrawn, or regressing to earlier behaviors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May repetitively engage in play about the death or the person who died. May have problems getting back on schedule or meeting developmental milestones. May have difficulty being comforted.
<p>School-age children</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gradually gain a more mature understanding of death. Begin to realize that death is final and that people do not come back to life. May have scary beliefs about death, like believing in the “boogey man” who comes for the person. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May ask lots of questions about how the person died and about what death means. May display distress and sadness in ways that are not always clear, like being irritable and easily angered. May avoid spending time with others. May have physical complaints (headaches, stomachaches). May have trouble sleeping. May have problems at school. May have no reaction at all. May dream of events related to the death or war. May want to call home during the school day. May reject old friends and seek new friends who have experienced a similar loss. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May repeatedly talk or play about the death. May have nightmares about the death. May become withdrawn, hide feelings (especially guilt), avoid talking about the person, or about places and/or things related to the death. May avoid reminders of the person (for example, may avoid watching TV news, may refuse to attend the funeral or visit the cemetery). May become jumpy, extra-alert, or nervous. May have difficulty concentrating on homework or class work, or may suffer a decline in grades. May worry excessively about their health, their parents’ health, or the health and safety of other people. May act out and become the “class clown” or “bully.”
<p>Teens</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have a full adult understanding of death. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May have similar grief reactions to those of school-age children when at home, with friends, and at school. May withdraw, become sad, or lose interest in activities. May act out, have trouble in school, or engage in risky behavior. May feel guilt and shame related to the death. May worry about the future. May hide their true feelings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May have similar traumatic grief reactions to those of school-age children when at home, with friends, and at school. May avoid interpersonal and social situations such as dating. May use drugs or alcohol to deal with negative feelings related to the death. May talk of wanting to harm themselves and express thoughts of revenge or worries about the future. May have low self-esteem because they feel that their family is now “different” or because they feel different from their peers.

- **Ongoing connections with the deceased sibling.** The sibling who has died may remain an influence in the surviving children’s lives. Although this can be comforting—for example, through pleasant memories of shared experiences and goals—it can also have a negative impact if surviving children idealize the deceased sibling, feel inadequate when they compare themselves to the deceased sibling, or try to “replace” the sibling by being just like him or her.

Tip: Focus on comforting connections with the sibling who died, perhaps by talking with surviving children about happy memories or special life lessons they shared. At the same time, help surviving children to see and appreciate their own unique strengths and abilities and their special place within the family.

- **Questions related to their beliefs and faith.** Surviving children’s perceptions of—and reactions to—the death of a sibling are often influenced by the cultural and religious background of their family and community. Although the rituals conducted after a death can be comforting, very young children do not fully understand the abstract concept of death, and some older children may question such explanations (for example, questioning a faith that could let their brother or sister die). When talking to children about their sibling’s death, try to incorporate not only your cultural and religious understanding of the death, but also a concrete, age-appropriate explanation of what happened.

Caregiver and Family Grief

If you have lost a child, the way in which you handle your grief can affect the bereavement process for your surviving children. In some parents and caregivers, grief over a lost child causes them to pull away or become emotionally absent from their surviving children. When this occurs, the surviving siblings may feel guilty for being happy or for needing their parents’ support. They may fear that their parents will never recover from the loss and feel a need to take care of their parents or be perfect to avoid upsetting them further. Children may believe their parents blame them for the sibling’s death and even act out because they feel they need to be punished, or to try to do everything right in an effort to “make up” for what they did.

If you are dealing with the loss of a child, it is important to have an active support network as well as safe places to express your grief. When you manage your own grief effectively, it eases the burden felt by the surviving children, offers them a positive role model for coping, and creates a more supportive environment for them to express their own grief. Here are a few other tips for helping your child—and yourself—to manage grief.

- **Don't be afraid to talk about the child who died.** It can be difficult to talk about a child who has died, especially if you feel that the surviving children are too young to understand and should be protected. Some family members may want to keep the death a secret—particularly when a child dies at birth or if one of a set of twins dies—or to remove all reminders of the child who has died. However, learning of the death by accident, by overhearing a conversation, or by finding a reminder such as a photo, can leave children shocked or overwhelmed. Sometimes parents believe that limiting conversations about the deceased child will help the other children to “get back to normal” or to move on with their lives. Children may misinterpret these actions to mean that it is not okay to talk about their own feelings about the death, or that the grownups can't handle seeing how sad they are. These children may try to hide their feelings, develop physical symptoms, or even develop traumatic grief symptoms. They may believe that this secrecy means that there was something shameful or bad about the child who died, about the survivors, or about the death itself. This may make children distrust their caregivers and other information they may be given.

Tip: Open communication will help you to understand your surviving children's feelings, fears, and understanding about their sibling's death. Although difficult, it is important to give children honest, age-appropriate information about their deceased sibling so that they can feel comfortable coming to you with their questions, concerns, and feelings. You can also look for and use opportunities to talk about the deceased child, sharing stories and memories about the child who died at special times as well as in everyday conversation.

- **Manage reminders:** After the death of a child, it is common to go through the child's belongings deciding what to store, remove, give to others, or keep. When parents or caregivers put away all physical reminders of the child who died, surviving children who have memories of their deceased sibling may be confused and upset by the disappearance of their brother's or sister's belongings. They may feel guilty for wanting the things in sight or for remembering the sibling. On the other hand, if parents or caregivers find it difficult to change anything and keep things exactly as they were, surviving siblings may feel afraid to touch any of the things or feel an ongoing sadness throughout the home.

Tip: Consider the impact of where and how many of your deceased child's things are kept visible in the home. Try to include the siblings in some of the decision making in ways that are appropriate to their age. Physical reminders such as pictures, toys, and clothing can be comforting for surviving children and let them know that the person who died was a valued member of the family. If you yourself find these reminders too upsetting, look for ways that the surviving children can keep some reminders.

Traumatic Grief Among Surviving Siblings

In some cases, the death of a sibling can lead to traumatic grief in surviving children, particularly if the sibling's death was itself traumatic (for example, a traffic accident, community violence, abuse, war, or a natural disaster) or stigmatizing (suicide, HIV/AIDS, drug use).

Since children may not express their feelings directly, it is important to **be aware of any changes in surviving children's play and behavior that may indicate their distress**. In addition to the traumatic grief reactions discussed earlier, children who are experiencing a traumatic grief reaction to sibling loss may exhibit or express it in the following ways:

- **Feeling helpless or hopeless.** After losing a cherished brother or sister, surviving children may feel adrift and lonely. They may give up, not enjoy life or, in extreme cases, feel they want to join the sibling and think about their own death. Sometimes they may feel suicidal or even talk about suicide.

Tip: Acknowledge surviving children's sadness and tell them that it's an understandable response to the family's loss. Encourage children to return to their regular, life-affirming activities. Playing and socializing with friends can increase children's sense of accomplishment and give them vital social support. However, be especially alert if children become extremely withdrawn or isolated, and seek professional help immediately if they express thoughts about suicide.

- **Wanting to change the past.** Surviving siblings may become preoccupied with thoughts that they could have or should have prevented the death. They may keep imagining or thinking of ways they could have saved their brother or sister if only they had called for help sooner or pushed the sibling out of the way of the speeding car. These thoughts can interfere with everyday activities, especially with schoolwork.

Tip: If children show recurring feelings of responsibility and guilt, reassure them that the death was not their fault. Explain that things often look different when we look back and think about "what might have been," but that there was nothing they could have done at the time. Let children know that you don't blame them for their sibling's death.

- **Feeling vulnerable and afraid.** The death of a sibling can change children's perceptions of themselves and of the world. They may feel more fearful, vulnerable, and aware of their own mortality and the mortality of the people they love. This can lead to their being overly cautious and overly protective of other siblings and of their parents or caregivers because they fear that something will happen to them.

Tip: Acknowledge surviving children's fears and talk about them without dismissing them. Reassure children about their safety, for example, by reviewing safety plans and establishing check-in times. Also, monitor your own fears and maintain a sense of control and calm.

- **Worry about physical symptoms.** If the sibling's death was related to a particular illness or to physical pain and suffering, symptoms related to those conditions can take on new meaning for surviving siblings. Parents and children alike may associate previously benign physical ailments with death. For example, if a sibling's death was due to a brain tumor, other family members may feel frightened or panicked when they have a headache. Caregivers should be aware that children can also develop physical symptoms due to anxiety (for example, children who refuse to go to school or frequently get sick at school may be fearful of parents or other siblings dying).

Tip: If surviving children express concerns about physical symptoms, avoid talking about your own fears but don't ignore their complaints. Show concern and, if need be, make an appointment with a trusted pediatrician who can objectively assess the situation. It may also be helpful to provide realistic reassurance about other family members' health and point out everyday healthy behaviors.

- **Avoiding reminders of the deceased sibling.** Surviving children may avoid people, places, or things that remind them of the sibling who died because these things can trigger memories of the death itself. This avoidance may or may not be obviously related to the death. For example, if siblings shared a bedroom, it may be difficult for the grieving sibling to sleep alone. Or a surviving sibling may no longer want to play Little League because he and his deceased brother or sister always played catch after dinner.

Tip: Look for changes in behavior and consider whether these can be linked to memories or reminders of the deceased sibling. Acknowledging the changes and the accompanying sadness is important, but finding alternatives can also be helpful, for example, rearranging the furniture in the bedroom or talking with a sympathetic baseball coach. If siblings are still intensely bothered by painful memories or denying their avoidant behavior, a mental health professional can help them develop positive coping skills and memories.

Sibling Identity

The death of a child often leads to changes in the structure of the family and in the roles of the surviving siblings. Depending on the number of children and their birth order, for example, a surviving child may now be the oldest or youngest child, the only girl or boy, or perhaps an only child. Parents and caregivers may rely on or change their expectations of the remaining children.

These changes may give surviving siblings a sense of pride in their new found responsibilities, but they may also result in feelings of pressure or even resentment if children are expected to replace or live up to the behavior and goals of the deceased sibling. Surviving siblings may respond by acting out or by rejecting their new place in the family. Caregivers should consider that negative changes in family functioning may be due to such shifting of roles. A family meeting or one-on-one talks with children about different feelings, with a goal of discussing different household jobs, can be a good way for everyone to share feelings and take responsibility for creating new family routines.

The death of a sibling also impacts surviving children in many small and large ways throughout their lives. For example, responding to a casual or typical question such as “Do you have any brothers or sisters?” can be difficult. To help children move on in a life without their sibling, **prepare surviving siblings for difficult questions** by helping them to develop and practice responses. Explore together what kinds of responses feel most comfortable and also what they mean to the surviving brother or sister. Reassure your child that he or she can choose how and when to talk about the deceased child. For example, in group situations or when dealing with new people, it may be simplest to talk about surviving siblings. In more private conversations, a more direct answer such as “my brother died two years ago” may feel more natural. Be aware that this topic may need to be revisited as children mature and face new situations.

Accepting New Siblings

The birth or introduction of a new child into the family following the death of another child can lead to mixed reactions. Surviving children may welcome the new child, but they may also feel that they were “not good enough” on their own to satisfy their parents’ needs. In addition, the surviving children may believe that children who die are easily replaced.

How to help: Be ready for mixed reactions. Talk with the surviving children about their feelings and reassure them about what makes them special. Emphasize that you can love more than one child and talk about what the new child represents to everyone in the family. Whenever possible, set aside special one-on-one time with the surviving siblings.

Sibling Death Resources

Dates and experiences that are strongly associated with the deceased child may bring up difficult feelings in surviving family members. For example, the deceased sibling's birthday, or specific experiences such as a surviving sibling going to summer camp alone, can bring up a range of memories and reactions. Try to **anticipate important anniversaries and take time to talk with surviving children about their feelings**. As a family, you can plan how to remember the deceased child and how to move toward the future.

The resources below offer information, guidance, and support to siblings of all ages who have lost a brother or sister, and to those who care for them. They cover the following areas:

- Information about the grief process at different ages
- Guidance and support in coping with “difficult” emotions such as anger
- Information for family members, friends, caregivers, professionals, and others who are involved with sibling survivors

Unless otherwise noted, the resources listed below are available from your local or online bookseller.

Books for Children and Young People

Preschool and Early Grades

Blanford, C. (2008). *Something happened: A book for children and parents who have experienced pregnancy loss*. Western Springs, IL: Cathy Blanford Publishing.

This paperback picture book is designed especially for children between the ages of two and six whose families have experienced a miscarriage, stillbirth, or neonatal death. The simple, clear story helps children to understand what has happened and to deal with their feelings and fears. It also reassures them that they are loved and secure.

Johnson, J., Johnson, M. (1982). *Where's Jess? For children who have a brother or sister die*. Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation.

This easy-to-understand picture book for children aged three to six is considered a classic about sibling grief. The authors wrote it after losing their daughter Jess to sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).

Keough, P. (2001). *Remembering our baby: A workbook for children whose brother or sister dies before birth*. Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation.

This workbook for children aged four to nine begins with the family finding out that the expected baby has died before birth. The book offers activities that allow children to express and share their feelings and to remember the brother or sister they never had a chance to know.

Munoz-Kiehne, M. (2000). *Since my brother died: Desde que murio mi hermano*. Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation.

In this bilingual Spanish-English paperback book for children aged four to eight, the young narrator talks about what it was like to lose his brother and how he learned to keep memories in his heart. The book includes a bilingual section for caregivers and teachers.

Old, W.C. (1994). *Stacy had a little sister*. Morton Grove IL: Albert Whitman & Company.

In this illustrated hardcover book for children aged four to nine, Stacy is so jealous of her new little sister that she sometimes wishes the baby would “go away.” When the baby dies of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), Stacy feels guilty and begins to fear that she too might die in her sleep. Her parents try to comfort and reassure her. The book includes information and resources about SIDS for parents.

Roper, J. (2001). *Dancing on the moon*. Cheverly, MD: SIDS Educational Services.

This paperback for toddlers to preschoolers tells the story of five-year-old Carly, who is jealous of her new baby brother Nigel. But when he dies of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), she feels confused and sad. She dreams that she flies to the moon to find him but he tells her that he will always be with her in her heart.

Schwiebert, P. (2007). *Someone came before you*. Portland, OR: Grief Watch.

This paperback picture book is for very young children through preschool age who were born after their parents lost a child born earlier. It describes the parents' grief and sadness and how they eventually decide they want to bring another child into their lives. The book offers ideas for keeping the deceased child's memory alive.

Schwiebert, P. (2003). *We were gonna have a baby, but we had an angel instead*. Portland, OR: Grief Watch.

This illustrated paperback helps children aged two to eight to confront and deal with their grief when a baby brother or sister dies before or shortly after birth. It includes practical suggestions for parents on how to help children cope and remember the baby who died.

Temes, R. (1992). *The empty place: A child's guide through grief*. Far Hills, NJ: Small Horizons.

In this paperback for children aged four to eight, a nine-year-old boy has trouble facing the reality of death and the pain of his loss when his beloved older sister dies. His babysitter, who had lost her own brother as a child, becomes an empathetic role model who helps him learn to cope and heal.

Yeomans, E. (2000). *Lost and found: Remembering a sister*. Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation.

In this paperback for children aged five to nine, a young girl explores what it means to “lose” her older and only sister to death. She copes with her grief as she tries to “find” Paige, and she learns that she and her family will always keep Paige in their lives.

Middle Grades

Aiken, S. (2001). *Anna's scrapbook: Journal of a sister's love*. Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation (www.centering.org).

This spiral-bound book for middle-school readers tells the story of Anna, whose preschool sister Amelia dies from an accidental fall. Anna deals with her grief by keeping a diary and then decides to create a scrapbook in which she can keep her memories of Amelia. The rest of the book offers readers blank pages in which they can create their own diary and scrapbook.

Couloumbis, A. (2000). *Getting near to baby*. New York: Putnam.

Intended for sixth- to eighth-graders, this novel (a 2000 Newbery Honor Book) tells the story of Willa Jo and Little Sister, whose family falls apart after their baby sister dies. When their mother sinks into a serious depression, the two older girls are sent to live with their strict Aunt Patty and their more sympathetic Uncle Hob. But no one understands what the girls are going through until the morning they climb up onto Aunt Patty's roof and refuse to come down. During that long, sad day, the girls and their family realize the healing power of love in the face of grief and loss.

Gryte, M. (1999). *No new baby: For siblings who have a brother or sister die before birth*. Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation (www.centering.org).

This paperback, for children aged nine to twelve, is a first-person account about the different feelings children may have when a sibling dies before birth. It answers children's most-asked questions and includes a section for parents and grandparents.

Jackson, A. (2004). *Can you hear me smiling? A child grieves a sister*. Washington, DC: Child & Family Press.

This paperback, for grades two to four, recounts the illness and death of African-American author Aariane Jackson's beloved older sister at age twelve. Both girls were adopted, and

Jackson describes their sibling intimacy and the difficult and conflicting emotions she had to cope with following her sister's death. The book includes a preface by the girls' mother and an afterword by grief counselors that offers advice on how to help children cope with the anguish of losing a sibling.

Jampolsky, G.G. (Ed.). (1983). *Straight from the siblings: Another look at the rainbow*. Millbrae, CA: Celestial Arts.

This collection of images and quotes from bereaved brothers and sisters, for children aged nine to twelve, is a memorial to love between siblings. The quotes and stories by the bereaved siblings who contributed to the book describe not only the sadness but also the difficult feelings, such as jealousy and guilt, that have troubled them.

Park, B. (2009). *Mick Harte was here*. New York: Scholastic.

In this paperback for sixth- through ninth-graders, eighth-grader Phoebe must come to terms with the death of her fun-loving brother Mick after he is killed in a bicycle accident at age twelve. The story leavens sorrow and grief with humor in capturing the pain that Phoebe and her family go through as they try to cope with their loss.

Rothman, J.C. (1996). *A birthday present for Daniel: A child's story of loss*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.

In this paperback for children aged seven to twelve, young Ellen shares what her brother Daniel's death means to her, and especially how she and her parents resolve the painful issue of how to acknowledge his birthday each year. Highly recommended by grief counselors and support groups, the book helps parents support their children as family members explore different ways of grieving and communicating their feelings about their loss.

Samuels, V.R. (2006). *Always my twin*. (N. Clemmons, Illus.). Victoria, BC: Trafford Publishing.

This illustrated paperback, for children aged seven through twelve, tells the story of a young girl who loses her twin sister shortly after their birth. Based on the experience of the author, who lost a twin daughter in infancy, it is a story of heartache, healing, and hope. The book includes interactive pages that readers can respond to by using pictures and describing feelings. It also lists support resources for families that have experienced the death of a baby, including a twin or other multiple sibling.

Simon, J. (2002). *This book is for all kids, but especially my sister Libby. Libby died*. Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel Publishing.

In this hardbound book for children aged nine to twelve, the author tells of the death of his younger sister Libby from a rare medical condition when she was 3½ years old. Jack was

only five and, like other small children facing such a huge loss, he thought no one else could understand how he felt. However, the universality of his story captures the emotions of every grieving sibling.

Thomas, C. (2005). *Hugs & kisses from Brittany: A children's book about the death of another child, from a child's point of view*. Orchard Hill, GA: Brittany's Books.

This paperback for children aged eight to twelve explores how one young girl coped with the death of a younger sibling. Shelby's discovery of the importance of hugs and kisses after her baby sister Brittany dies of a brain tumor opens the way for talks and sharing about grief, loss, hope, and healing.

High School and Beyond

Linn-Gust, M. (2001). *Do they have bad days in heaven? Surviving the suicide loss of a sibling*. Albuquerque, NM: Chellehead Works.

This paperback for teen and adult readers recounts the author's personal experience of losing her younger sister to suicide. Considered the first comprehensive resource for sibling suicide survivors, it offers a journey of hope. It includes available research and practical advice for survivors and those who care about them and want to help them. The author is the creator of Sibling Survivors (www.siblingsurvivors.com; see listing in "Web Sites" section below).

Ruiz, R.A. (2001). *Coping with the death of a brother or sister*. New York, NY: Rosen Publishing Company.

This hardbound book for seventh- to twelfth-graders offers honest, descriptive narratives in which young survivors of sibling loss talk about how they handled their grief. When a brother or sister dies, everything changes for the survivors, even if the death occurred when the surviving child was very young. A chapter on finding additional help and resources speaks to youngsters who may be coping with feelings of anger or rage in the aftermath of their loss.

Books for Caregivers

Davies, B. (1998). *Shadows in the sun: The experiences of sibling bereavement in childhood*. New York: Routledge.

This study summarizes a great deal of information about how the death of a sibling affects the remaining children. The author discusses the bonds among siblings and how the survivors may react to their loss, how children understand death, how a sibling's death affects the overall functioning of the family, and the long-term effects of the death. The book includes practical guidelines for those seeking to help grieving siblings, children, and families.

DeVita-Raeburn, E. (2007). *The empty room: Understanding sibling loss*. New York, NY: Scribner.

The author, a science journalist, tells how the death of her older brother at age seventeen of aplastic anemia (which forced him to live in a sterile hospital “bubble room” for almost half his life) affected her. She uses powerful interviews with more than 200 sibling survivors to explore how difficult it can be, and how long it can take, to finally come to terms with the grief of losing a brother or sister.

White, P. G. (2006). *Sibling grief: Healing after the death of a sister or brother*. Lincoln, NE: iUniverse.

The author, a psychologist who specializes in working with people who have lost a sibling, was only fifteen when her sister died of a rare form of soft-tissue cancer. White draws on her own experience as well as on her professional background to explain the griefwork involved in sibling loss. She also explores how grief and healing are reflected in siblings’ dreams. White is the creator of The Sibling Connection, a not-for-profit support organization and web site (<http://www.counselingstlouis.net>) for bereaved siblings (see listing in “Web Sites” section below).

Videos

Compassionate Friends. (1993). *This healing path*. Northbrook, IL: Film Ideas, Inc. (VHS video).

This 35-minute video addresses issues and concerns that affect those who are grieving the loss of a sibling. It includes an introduction by former Chicago Bears middle linebacker Mike Singletary, himself a bereaved sibling, and a discussion guide. The siblings interviewed share their pain, sadness, anger, and fear. They also discuss issues such as parental overprotectiveness and their own hope for the future as they meet the challenge of their loss.

Web Sites

Open to Hope (<http://opentohope.com/hope-online/dealing-with-grief/dealing-with-loss/death-of-a-sibling/>)

This link on the web site of the Open to Hope Foundation (www.opentohope.com), a general online grief resource, focuses specifically on sibling grief. It offers a series of first-person accounts and reflections on sibling loss, and visitors are invited to leave comments.

The Compassionate Friends (http://www.compassionatefriends.org/Local_Chapters/Frequently_Asked_Questions.aspx)

This national organization, with chapters throughout the United States and worldwide, is dedicated to helping parents following the death of a child at any age by offering peer support groups for grieving parents. The web site also provides a list of resources.

The Sibling Connection (<http://www.counselingstlouis.net/>)

Created by psychologist P.G. White, author of *Sibling grief: Healing after the death of a sister or brother* (see the listing in “Books for Caregivers”), The Sibling Connection, offers support to anyone who has lost a sibling. It includes extensive information, articles, and resources about sibling grief at different ages along the life cycle. It also lists resources on sibling loss in films, art, and psychology. Visitors can submit their own stories and communicate through the site’s message board.

Established by Congress in 2000, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) is a unique collaboration of academic and community-based service centers whose mission is to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for traumatized children and their families across the United States. Combining knowledge of child development, expertise in the full range of child traumatic experiences, and attention to cultural perspectives, the NCTSN serves as a national resource for developing and disseminating evidence-based interventions, trauma-informed services, and public and professional education.

Suggested Citation:

National Child Traumatic Stress Network Child Traumatic Grief Committee. (2009). Sibling Loss Fact Sheet Sibling Death and Childhood Traumatic Grief: Information for Families. Los Angeles, CA & Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.