

Family and Sibling Grief

Parents would like to protect their children from the hard facts of life, but they can't. When death of a family member or especially sibling comes, the surviving children are affected but will react in different ways depending upon their age and experience. The following points are important for adults to remember:

- Children have to be allowed to respond to the death of a family member or sibling in their own way. Each family member's relationship with the deceased is unique and their response to the loss may vary from one person to another. Children must be allowed to respond in a way that is right for them even if they act as though nothing is wrong following a death.
- Don't make a child feel guilty if s/he acts as if nothing is wrong because they don't seem as distraught as parents.
- Do not exclude the child when grieving. Parents need to talk about their sadness with the child so s/he does not feel that s/he is the cause of their sadness. Very young children, especially, will feel adult's anger, frustration, or sadness as being something for which they are responsible.

School age children differ in their reaction to death.

- Children up to about age seven do not see death as being a real change or irreversible. They view death as a "separation from mother" and may revert to clinging, close, or regressive behavior especially at the death of a sibling. As they tend to believe in mystical powers, they tend to feel guilty for the death, especially if they, at some time, may have wished someone dead.
- From about age seven to twelve, children see death as an aggressive personification—a bogey-man or a Darth Vader who is coming to get them. To ward off these fears, they may engage in ritual or incantation.
- Children over 12 can respond to death as adults do. The problem may become religious or philosophical. They question the justice of a God who allowed the death to happen. Some adolescents develop a kind of Nihilism and live for the moment. Others may be so affected by a death that they develop important political and religious commitments. Some adolescents may have difficulty in expressing emotions connected with death and develop emotional problems when they have not adequately resolved their grief.

Grief can be a critical problem for children. If a parent sees major changes in a child—such as a change in sleeping and eating habits, a drop in grades, or talk of suicide—within 18 months after a significant death, the family should seek professional counseling.

(Adapted with permission from Los Angeles Unified School District.)

