

# When a Sibling Dies...

In the aftermath of the death of a sibling, a child needs answers but often does not know how to ask the questions. They do know:

- Their world is dramatically different
- Their adults are immensely sad.
- Someone they love is missing.
- They overhear bits and pieces of conversations, and when trying to put it together they can become confused and frightened.

Birth order may affect how a child responds to a sibling's death:

- Younger children may feel jealous and lonely as attention shifts from them. Resentment is created.
- Older children may feel burdened by the expectations of their helpfulness, may have to put off their grief or personal plans.

## **Helpful Points for Child Care Providers**

- It is common that a preschool child will prefer to stay home. However, the parents may need for their child to be in your safe care and believe keeping a schedule for the surviving child is helpful *and sometimes it is*.
- Listening is all that is needed from you if the emotion in the child is not extreme or woeful.
- Ask the question of the child, "What do you understand?"
- Ask the family for facts, and use these factual words when comforting the child
- Be honest, use real words such as "Died, and Dead"
- Avoid words like: "Lost, gone to sleep, passed away, passed on, God will come take his soul, he is in a better place."
- Be very careful of "God Talk", consider it off limits because of cultural beliefs and confusion due to a child's age.
- Do not overwhelm the child with too much information all at one time.
- Stress to the child they are safe in your classroom.
- Let the child know their feelings are okay and talk about any fears they voice.
- Tell a child clearly and lovingly that they did not "do or think" anything that caused their sibling to die.
- Confirm which family member will return to pick the child up at the end of the day. Remind the child someone will be coming to get them, and use a name when possible.
- Tell the child it is okay to cry and it is okay to play.
- After the child cries is a good time to take a walk with you, to work out/off the stress.
- Understand their need to play funeral games and burial of dolls or other objects.



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*Promoting Healthy Social Behaviors in Child Care Centers*

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- Offer your love, understanding and support with touch and eye contact.
- Appreciate this is a scary time, they may think others will die next/soon, or even that they may die.
- You could remind them how healthy they are. Bring awareness to their beating own heart by teaching them how to feel their pulse or bring in a stethoscope for them to hear their own heart beating.
- Parents are not always aware of the grief experience of their surviving child and this can compound the child's emotions. Keep connected to the parents and communicate any extreme emotions their child is exhibiting and provide resources and referrals.



## **Some points to keep in mind:**

- Children under five years of age are very egocentric and self-centered; their point of reference is intently personal.
- Their thinking is mighty and magical. It seems right to them that they get what they wish for, both good or bad. They believe it will come true for them.
- It is difficult for them to grasp the concept of death being final.
- Death is disturbing to young children because of the separation involved.
- A child's fantasies can become greater than the reality of the situation.

The loss of a sibling can leave the surviving child with bewilderment and confusion as they stand on the sidelines of all the drama in their home.

- It is helpful to lead a child to awareness of their own story by asking how they feel about what has happened to them.
- It is helpful to offer assistance in the expression of their emotions by being a scribe and write things down.
- It is helpful to suggest art expressions such as creating a picture of happy times with the child that has died.
- It is helpful to have a memory box available in your classroom for the child to have a place to keep some things they have shared with their sibling. Develop an understanding with the child about private time to visit these things.
- It is helpful to ask the child: "What could I do to help you with this?" and then follow through.

