Helping a child grieve the death of a brother or sister
CHILD SIBLING GRIEF

The sudden and violent death of a loved one in an impaired driving crash is extremely painful. It is hard to accept that no one is immune from danger in the world and that we are vulnerable. Adults and children alike are faced with the realization that painful things happen because it is impossible to live a life without hurt.

In order to fully appreciate the impact of a death, it is important to consider the significance of human relationships. The degree of pain and suffering that follows a death is directly related to the nature of the relationship between the survivor and the person who died. Without the relationship, the death would carry no meaning and cause no suffering.

One type of relationship in particular, the relationship between siblings, is unique. Brothers and sisters are friends, allies, protectors and mentors. They often share a similar history and experience, building bonds that can potentially last a lifetime. Even at their worst, sibling relationships are significant and can negatively impact the life of a surviving sibling when the relationship is severed.

Children and teens who are grieving the death of brother or sister are often forgotten survivors. They are particularly vulnerable when a traumatic death occurs. Adults have the means of pursuing support in the grieving process, while children are often left to their own devices.

As a parent or caregiver of a child killed in an impaired driving crash, you have experienced a profound and incomparable loss. Despite the intense pain you may feel, you have another child or other children who are in need of your love and support. The death of a child is not only a loss for you but also a loss for the youngest members of your family.
A TRAUMATIC DEATH

When a loved one is diagnosed with a terminal illness, family and friends begin to feel the loss before the loss occurs. This is often referred to as anticipatory grief. It may be tempting to label this as “normal grief,” but few can actually say that they feel “normal” when they are grieving. Regardless, a death that is anticipated may be easier to cope with than a death resulting from an impaired driving crash.

When someone is killed suddenly and violently, reactions of family and friends can be intense, complicated and long lasting. For many people these intense reactions mark unfamiliar territory. Family members tend to think about the preventability of such events over and over again. The need to place blame may cause a great deal of friction within the family.

Generally, a sudden death is more difficult to cope with than an expected death because surviving family members and friends are emotionally assaulted with no time to gradually prepare for the loss. Children may react differently to a traumatic death than if they had an opportunity to spend time with a brother or sister who was diagnosed with cancer.

In addition, children and teens who experience the traumatic death of a loved one often feel an increased sense of vulnerability. They may begin to question, “Could this happen to me too?” They may also show a curiosity or concern about the manner in which their sibling was killed. They may ask, “Was it painful?”

When children ask questions about death, adults are often caught off guard, left wondering how to respond. It might be useful to understand more about the development of children as it relates to their concepts of death. If you understand where your children are coming from, you have an opportunity to answer questions in a meaningful way. In answering questions, you are providing a safe environment with the love and support children need to grieve the loss of their brother or sister.
DEATH AND DEVELOPMENT

Children have been observed responding to death over the course of many years. Most researchers report their findings and define children’s concepts of death in correlation to specific age groups. Age, however, is not the only determinant to a child’s concept of death. If a child exhibits a higher level of cognitive functioning, he or she will likely have a more complex understanding of death. Our concept of death develops over time and changes as our capacity to think in the abstract evolves, eventually meeting the complex realities that death represents.

Young infants are probably not able to conceptualize death. Without language, they cannot understand explanations about death but can feel the absence of a sibling who died. Toddlers may begin to recognize dead objects but may not transfer that understanding to their brother or sister. They can recognize when things are “all gone” yet may believe that the absence is temporary or reversible. Toddlers and preschoolers may be able to conceptualize what death means if parents assist them in doing so, although their understanding will be limited.

It is important to consider that toddlers and preschoolers are concrete, literal thinkers. What is observed is and always will be. A child this age believes that anything active is alive. A wind-up toy seems alive when it moves, or a stuffed animal seems alive during play because it has assumed lifelike characteristics.

“Magical thinking” is an important characteristic of toddler and preschooler development. A child may fly to the moon, fight monsters and cook dinner for a hundred guests in the course of a few minutes of play. Toddlers and preschoolers are capable of a nearly endless variety of fantasies. However, most fantasies are based upon something the child has seen or heard, even if it was misunderstood.

As children continue to grow and develop, their concept of death also develops and becomes more refined. Roughly between the ages of six and eight, children begin to understand cause and effect. They understand that death is not reversible and that death can be applied to others, especially to those who are old or sick. Generally children of this age do not have experience with the death of other children, so when a sibling dies, the experience can be scary. They come to realize that death is not something reserved for the old.

Children this age also become aware of their conscience. They begin to sense right and wrong, and are capable of feeling guilt. Although they are more verbal and can easily express feelings of sadness, anger and happiness, they may lack the intellectual sophistication to accurately assess their role in a particular death. It is
not uncommon for a child to fear that their brother or sister died because of their ill wishes. Additionally, a child may erroneously believe that because of his or her bad behaviour, he or she is being punished with the death of a sibling.

By the age of eight or nine, children understand death much the same as an adult. Of particular significance for children in the eight-to-twelve age group is the increased awareness of the future and what it means. Eventually, all life ends in death. Children begin to realize that anyone could die, even themselves. Exceptionally distressing for a child this age is the realization that when a sibling dies they can expect a future without their brother or sister.

Because girls tend to mature faster, they may be considered a preteen in the ten to twelve range, whereas boys arrive a year or two later. Preteens and adolescents are on the threshold of independence. They live in an intense world of self-discovery and are primarily concerned with life, identity, status and peer pressure. They are tightly bonded with peers and begin to disengage from family. They have developed adult-like concepts of attributing life appropriately, but often face their own social and emotional immaturity.

While their thinking may be logical and based in reality, adolescents rarely want to address the subject of death. There is a wide spectrum of emotions attached to death and these emotions can be quite intense. The basic assumption is that adolescents tend to change their ideas about death. On the one hand they may acknowledge their own mortality, while on the other hand believe that death is not inevitable. They may engage in self-destructive behaviours just to prove to themselves that they are indeed correct.
SIBLING RESPONSE TO DEATH

Grief is not an event but a process of experiencing the emotional, mental, physical, social and spiritual effects of a loss. Grief reactions are common to most people although each person grieves in their own way and in their own time. Just like their adult counterparts, children exhibit behaviours and emotions that are to be expected after the traumatic death of a loved one. These behaviours and emotions should be deemed problematic ONLY if they impede the regular development of the child.

There are many factors that impact a child’s reaction to a death of a sibling. There are internal and external mechanisms at work. Internal forces that influence a child’s response to death include the child’s age, cognitive ability, coping style, temperament and past experience with death and dying. External forces include the nature of the sibling relationship, the nature of the death, the structure of the family, the impact of the death on the parents and the parents’ responses to the grieving child.

The youngest of infants do respond to the death of a loved one, yet the true extent of their bereavement is unknown. Typically their response is evident when a mother, father or other prominent caregiver dies or is absent for some reason. One of the most prevalent responses is crying, which is probably a response to the physical withdrawal of the caregiver and the change in the manner in which he or she receives care.

Older infants are more aware of those around them but remain dependent upon a primary caregiver, which is typically a mother or father. Older infants suffer the absence of their sibling as well as the disruption in their care as a result of grieving parents or caregivers. They may exhibit loud screams of anger, disinterest in food and toys, as well as disturbed sleep patterns. When primary caregivers return to providing structured care and support, an older infant will most likely be able to recover.

It is common for parents or caregivers to assume that young children do not or cannot experience grief. However, toddlers and preschoolers may simply grieve in ways that adults do not connect with responses to death. Toddlers may display regressive behaviors, such as wetting or soiling themselves, wanting to breast feed or using security blankets and pacifiers previously left behind. They may also begin to throw frequent temper tantrums, push other children or scream.
Because of their concept of death, children between the ages of six and eight may view the death of a sibling as reversible. They may ask the same questions, over and over again, such as “When is Tommy coming home?” Children may accept the news of the death in a matter-of-fact way and may speak of the death or deceased person in the same detached manner they speak of a playmate or pet. In the long run, children in this age group may express deep sadness by way of tears or detachment. They may be especially vulnerable to feelings of guilt and fear that they somehow contributed to the death of their brother or sister.

Even though children between the ages of eight and twelve have better verbal skills as compared to younger children, their ability to verbally express their thoughts and feelings are outweighed by confusion. It may be difficult for a child to believe that his or her sibling is really dead. Frequently thoughts and feelings are expressed through behaviours, such as tearfulness, irritability, withdrawal, disruptiveness or regression. Some children in this age group may appear to be doing well with no overt signs of distress. They may be trying to protect their parents from the burden of their grief, or they may be waiting until the family is stabilized before they fully experience their grief.

As with preteens, adolescents initially respond to the death of a loved one in disbelief. As the reality of the death sets in, adults expect adolescents to respond in a particular way, a way that may or may not honestly reflect what the teenager is thinking or feeling. It is likely that a teen will long for his or her sibling, but it is more likely that a teen will suppress their emotions, fearing how a display of sadness will be perceived by others. Anger is an emotion that may be more readily expressed, as anger is an emotion that coincides with normal adolescent development.

Grieving is a difficult task for a child of any age. A child’s grief may go unnoticed or be minimized by the adults who love them, primarily because of a lack of understanding about children and the grief process. When a sibling dies, children lose a best friend, a playmate and someone who loves and comforts them. Children may revisit the death of a brother or sister throughout their lives as they continue to grow and will need the support of parents or caregivers each step of the way.
A UNIQUE GRIEF

Child sibling grief is unique in many ways. Like adults, children experience the pain and hurt associated with the death of a loved one. However, children may have more difficulty expressing the thoughts and feelings related to the pain they feel. Children tend to express themselves through action versus words because they may not have an understanding of what it is they are feeling, or why they feel the way they do. Parents, caregivers and even older siblings help children identify their feelings. If a parent or caregiver is incapacitated by their own grief, the grieving child is left to sort out their feelings alone.

A child's difficulty in understanding their feelings about the death of a sibling is compounded by their understanding of death. Depending upon their age and development, children may feel very confused about the death of a brother or a sister. Confusion or an inability to understand the how and why of a situation can lead to anxiety and fear.

Perhaps the most profound effects of the death of a sibling are the changes in the functioning and the structure of the family. When a child dies, parents are overcome with grief and may have difficulty performing their respective roles as caregiver. Surviving children are left wondering what is going on or what they should do. Sometimes their response to a death seems inappropriate to adults, and children develop a sense that their grief is wrong. Ultimately they may begin to feel that they don't belong or that they don't fit in.

In some families, a surviving child may become a target for a parent's anger over the death of a child. In other families, a surviving child may be overprotected by a parent's intense fear of losing another child. Still other parents may prohibit any discussion regarding the child who died. A grieving child's response to the death of a brother or sister is heavily dependent, then, upon interactions with parents or other caregivers.
HELPING CHILDREN HEAL

Respond to children’s feelings. It is very important to respond appropriately to children’s feelings. Because a younger child tends to communicate through behaviours, parents and caregivers may want to offer a lot of touching, holding and stroking to help the child feel secure. With older children, it is useful for parents and caregivers to encourage free expression of thoughts and feelings.

Children may express sadness, fear and anger, all of which are to be expected. Do not be afraid of tears and do not attempt to hurry them along. Anger may be acted out in physically appropriate ways, such as running outside or stuffing newspapers in a trash bag. When a child appears to be feeling a particular way, ask how they are feeling. One way for a child to become comfortable in sharing thoughts and feelings is for a parent or caregiver to be open in sharing thoughts and feelings.

Reassure children as they bring up their fears. However irrational their fears may seem, attempt to view them in terms of a child’s development. A child can usually accept explanations when there is adequate support from a parent or caregiver. Responses to fears that are direct, simple and clear accompanied by touching and holding are helpful responses.

Understand that children frequently substitute feelings they can handle for those they cannot. They may giggle or laugh at things that are not funny. It is important to view this behaviour as adaptive coping.

No matter how comfortable a child becomes with an age-appropriate explanation of death, they will process the experience and their feelings about it upon each developmental level. As a child matures, they will need additional information about their sibling and the circumstances surrounding the death. The child will need time, space and opportunity to grieve and grow.

Spend time playing together. Children often communicate their deepest feelings through actions. It is beneficial to respond to their feelings with actions. Parents and caregivers may support their children by taking time to sit down and play with them, not guiding the play, but allowing them to express whatever they want through the use of toys. Responses like “Your doll got angry when his brother/sister left” or “Your doll is crying in the bed. What is she sad about?” are affirming statements and encourage children to work through their grief.
Talk about the death. There is little to be gained in answering questions that are not asked. Honest and adequate answers to children’s questions about death are helpful, particularly those that are developmentally appropriate. Like adults, children may experience a great deal of ambivalence about the finality of death. Children may insist that their sibling is alive or that the sibling was seen breathing or opening their eyes in the casket.
Help children to understand that physical death, in itself, does not hurt. The family is crying because they hurt inside. The sadness comes from the fact that a relationship that meant much to everyone has now been lost.

Reinforce to young children that their loved one did not choose to die. In life, people are given choices, and some make bad choices, such as using alcohol or other drugs and then driving. These choices can hurt and kill other people. It is no one’s fault except the person who made the bad choice.

Write down ways you answer your child’s questions about death. If kept in a journal, these responses can be used later as a reference for future discussions. Communicate with school personnel, extended family and friends regarding your way of explaining death. If they understand your philosophy, confusing messages can be avoided.

Use caution when communicating with younger children, as they are concrete thinkers. Making statements like “To die is to go to sleep” may frighten a child, fearing that if they go to sleep that they will die too. A statement like “Your brother/sister has gone away for a very long time” may leave a child feeling abandoned, and may leave them with the anticipation that brother/sister will return.

**Allow children to share experiences of memorial observances.** Allow children the opportunity to attend the funeral or memorial service. This confronts them with the reality that death has occurred and helps them acknowledge their loss. It is important to give a child time prior to the funeral to view the body and say goodbye in their own way.

Children need detailed information about what to expect at the funeral. Perhaps they will want to visit with the funeral home director who can answer questions. Although children should be encouraged to attend funerals, they should never be forced. Likewise, they should not be forced to kiss or touch the deceased, although it is perfectly all right if they wish to do so.

If the funeral has now passed, and children were not allowed to participate, it is not too late to remedy the situation. Ask a trusted clergy person or the funeral director to conduct a short, simple memorial service just for children. Invite all the children who might like to come. Perhaps it can be held at the grave site, and the children can take photos of their loved one along in remembrance. Be prepared to answer a lot of questions.
Explore meaningful ways to remember a loved one. Allow children to share experiences of remembrance, such as going to the cemetery. Going to the cemetery works against avoidance, denial and repression of painful feelings. The sadness felt in that place may help the child move on through their grief.

Children need concrete ways of expressing themselves. It may be important for children to take flowers, letters or other gifts to the cemetery. Encourage the child to write a goodbye letter to their sibling. The letter can be taken to the cemetery and buried or placed with a flower arrangement.

Children may want objects, clothing or a photograph of the loved one. Do not worry if they want to take these objects to bed with them. Making up games that begin with “Remember when” or “Do you remember” to facilitate the expression of feelings may offer additional ways to remember the person who died.

Remember the deceased at holidays. Like you, children will be especially aware of the absent sibling around holidays and will want to find ways to include the deceased in the festivities. Young children especially mark time by the passage of holidays. You may not feel much like celebrating Passover or lighting fireworks, but the maintenance of tradition is important. Nevertheless, even young children will understand that things have changed and may have some ideas of ways to do things differently if following family traditions will be too painful.

Protect children from the emotional collapse of parents or caregivers. While sharing as much of the family crisis as possible, protect the child from witnessing an emotional collapse on the part of one on whom they depend. Children can usually handle feelings of sorrow, loneliness and anger, but to witness an emotional collapse will bring on unnecessary anxiety and insecurity. Ask the child how they feel about your sadness. This will help them with their own feelings.

Take care of yourself as parent or caregiver. Caring for a bereaved child may be painful and time-consuming. Realize that you, too, are moving through various phases of grief, just like your children. However, you will rarely be at the same place they are at the same time.

Take care of yourself. Attend victim support groups, write in a journal or seek counseling for a while. The best thing you can do for your child is to deal with your own bereavement in a healthy way.
LESSONS IN GRIEF

If you have questions or concerns or would like additional support in helping your child cope with death, call a local hospice, grief centre, local MADD chapter, your child’s guidance counselor at school or a mental health professional. Many hospital social work departments can refer you to appropriate programs or professionals. Funeral directors and faith-based community leaders are also good resources.

Experiencing grief is a necessary part of living. Lessons in grieving and surviving are important gifts you can give children. Much of what they learn about death and bereavement will remain with them throughout their lives.
For more information or assistance:
Visit MADD Canada’s web site at www.madd.ca,
email info@madd.ca or call 1-800-665-6233, ext. 222.

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