

Bereavement After a Child's Death

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KEYWORDS

- Parent bereavement • Sibling bereavement • Palliative care • Pediatrics • Grief
- Pediatric death • Provider grief • Memory making

KEY POINTS

- The death of a child can have an impact on various members of a child's family and community. Often this loss has the most direct impact on the child's primary caregivers, immediate family members, siblings, and peers. It may also have an impact on health care providers as well as additional members of the child's community, such as those within their school, church congregation, and peers.
- Grief after the death of a child can have an impact on bereavement in a multitude of ways, including spiritually, emotionally, developmentally, and functionally.
- Those who are experiencing grief after a pediatric death can receive support in their coping through a multitude of resources, such as individual/group counseling, online support groups, family/sibling camps, and bereavement follow-up provided by hospitals and/or hospices.
- Pediatric loss can also have an impact on providers, who and can benefit from supportive resources and opportunity for processing. It can be beneficial for hospitals and other institutions to offer standardized and individual support for providers. Palliative care teams, social workers, and chaplains can be helpful in offering resources and best practices in this regard.

The death of a child is often a heart-wrenching experience that can have a significant impact on parents, siblings, and families while also often having ripple effects throughout the child's community. Pediatric loss has an impact on family structure and dynamics, individual identity formation, and conceptualization as well as professional practice. This article explores bereavement after a child's death through the lens of the family, the parent, the sibling, the forgotten grievers, and the provider.

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FAMILY EXPERIENCE

Family Modeling of Emotional Processing

Children of any developmental stage may be acutely aware of the expression and processing of grief that surrounds them after their sibling has died. This is not to say that such emotions must be hidden or veiled; in fact, the allowance for parental experience of bereavement to be shared and reflected on openly can create a feeling of safety within a bereaved child who is learning how to navigate such an experience.¹ Just as grief, mourning, and bereavement take of many forms for parents throughout a lifetime, so do such navigations for bereaved siblings. Creating the space for honest and loving language, even when the words are imperfect and difficult to find, can at times be the most helpful intervention for a child whose sibling has died. Overall, the sense of connection that one is not alone in such an experience can be one of the most beneficial therapeutic supports.

Holidays/Anniversaries

Holidays and anniversaries can be especially challenging for bereaved families because they are so acutely reminded of the loved one who has died and the impact their absence has had on the family. Feelings of dread, worry, guilt, sadness, and avoidance may arise. Although it may be an emotional experience, it is imperative that children and families have the opportunity to remember and honor their loved one, not only at their death but also for years to come. Creating new family traditions on holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries can become special moments in which a family can continue on their bereavement journey. As a family reconstructs the meaning of their child's life and death, they can create lasting legacy through the addition of new ways to honor their child in the hopes of off-setting the potential of complicated grief.²

Although these special days can be a reminder of the pain and loss, ignoring them or pretending that they do not exist may be more detrimental to the family. The absence of acknowledgment can lead to feelings of isolation for individual family members. The emotions do not simply disappear but rather simmer until they are too much to bear. Although families may feel particularly vulnerable, they are honest expressions of the grief journey. If a family can work together to discuss how they will honor their loved ones or create new traditions, this can alleviate some of the stress that will be presented on the actual day.³

Amongst the tears and challenges, sharing memories and legacy can be comforting and cathartic for each family member. Still, parents/guardians should remain cognizant of the varying cognitive ages of surviving siblings. What causes emotional pain for one family member may bring pleasure to another. When family traditions arise, younger children are more apt to desire continuing previous traditions that involved the deceased, whereas older children and adolescents may feel it is too painful to continue the traditions while experiencing the memories of partaking in them with the deceased. Therefore, it may be especially helpful to offer choices for level of involvement of activities for each family member. Keeping open patterns of communication will assist in assessing and addressing each individual family member's needs.^{3,4}

Above all, families should be reminded that it is okay to still experience joy around the holidays, despite the absence of their loved one. Over time, each family can work to develop their own traditions honoring their loved ones. As providers, it can be of service to the family to acknowledge these difficult days and develop plans to maximize support and anticipate disabling grief and anxiety.

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