

School Support For Children Grieving the Loss of a Sibling

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Few things are as shocking and destabilizing to a family as the death of a child, whether that death is sudden or the family has time to adjust to the possibility beforehand. While parents undergo their own intense grief at losing a child, the surviving sibling or siblings have their own process of grieving and understanding the loss, which can benefit from a number of support systems. While parents have the knowledge and agency to proactively seek out other adults who are experiencing similar losses, children who lose a sibling are likely to be the only children they know experiencing such a tragedy. Children have little ability to expand their own social circles, therefore grieving children can greatly benefit from effective and proactive social support provided by schools.

There is a challenge in a parent supporting a child who is grieving the loss of a sibling, because that parent is by definition simultaneously managing their own grief at the loss of their child. The mutual support of grieving parents and children is invaluable, as is the natural process of restructuring and meaning making following the loss of a family member. But it would be unwise to assume that all of a grieving sibling's emotional and social support needs can be met within the walls of the grieving family system. Schools provide a crucial resource for grieving siblings, both as sites of normalcy and as providers of resources beyond the reach of an individual family.

If your child is experiencing the loss of a sibling, it is important to communicate with your child's school and ask which resources they have available. In a study done by Sharp et. al. (2018), quality support from teachers and friends at school both helped on its own as well as enhanced the desirable effects of parental support. Support from in-school professionals was similarly augmentative when observed as a part of a larger support system that spans home and school. While thankfully it is unlikely that any one primary school will have enough grieving

siblings to form a support group, periodic check-ins with a well trained school counselor who is in conversation with the child's parents and teachers has the potential to mitigate the more harmful outcomes associated with grieving the loss of a sibling.

If your child is grieving the loss of a sibling, the most important step you must first take is to establish your own emotional safety and the safety of everyone in your home. Once you perceive that safety as stable, it can be valuable to reach out to your child's school and ask questions such as the following:

- What resources do you have for my child as they undergo this traumatic life change?
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- How are your teachers prepared to talk to my child's class in an age-appropriate way?
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- What can my child do at school when they are overwhelmed or need to leave the room momentarily?
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- Can we set up a protocol for contacting me when my child is unusually upset?

It can be difficult to advocate for your child during the best of times, especially when facing any source of institutional power, such as a school. It is even more difficult when your family is experiencing a traumatic loss. In the United States, cultural values of individualism encourage families to handle difficult things on their own (without social or institutional support), as well as unquestioning deference toward institutional procedures already in place.

But if you are in a place of safety (emotional and physical) and have the capacity amidst your own grief, reaching out to your child's school to establish procedures for your own child's grief management and taking full advantage of resources available, can augment the positive support your child receives at home. Combined, support of school, parents, teachers, friends, and community can turn a horrible experience into one that, though horrible, fosters resilience, connection, and meaning-making.

Reference

Howard Sharp, K. M., Russell, C., Keim, M., Barrera, M., Gilmer, M. J., Foster Akard, T., Compas, B. E., Fairclough, D. L., Davies, B., Hogan, N., Young-Saleme, T., Vannatta, K., & Gerhardt, C. A. (2018). Grief and growth in bereaved siblings: Interactions between different sources of social support. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 33(3), 363–371.

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