

A booklet by and for parents of children
whose brother or sister has died.



guiding light

What About the Other Kids?



**red
nose**
Grief and Loss

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from the money raised by the*

ProStyle SIDS and Kids ACT Golf Day

In memory of

Jackson Louis Asher
4/6/2002 – 6/9/2003

*who is loved and missed immensely by his big brothers Dylan and Mitchell
and whose memory will live on in his little brothers Bennett and Brady.*

We hope you find this wonderful and insightful book helpful.

Richard, Toni, Dylan, Mitchell, Bennett & Brady Asher
2005

Red Nose Grief and Loss formerly known as SIDS and Kids.



“ We tell children about the birds and the bees but we don’t really let them know about what happens when they stop flying. Death is a part of life and when people stop thinking of it as a taboo subject we can all be much more genuine. We should be able to express exactly what we feel without thinking someone will judge us. ”

Walter Mikac 8/6/2000 (Husband of Nanette, father of Alannah and Madeline, all of whom died 28/4/1996)

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Introduction

When a child dies suddenly and unexpectedly, it has an impact on the whole family. Like you, your surviving children will be deeply affected by the death of their brother or sister. As much as you would wish to, you cannot take away their grief. In the past, you have probably been able to comfort your children about any loss or hurt – it's what parents want to do for their children. It is distressing to find that you cannot do the same now; however, there are different ways in which you **can** help and comfort your children.

This booklet shares the thoughts of parents who have experienced the sudden and unexpected death of a child through SIDS, accident, sudden onset illness, stillbirth and other perinatal deaths. These parents hope that their experiences may help guide you in providing support to your grieving children.

In the early days, it may be too hard to concentrate on all the information in this booklet. We suggest you start by focusing on those sections that are most relevant to you.

Remember that children, no matter what their age, are unusually sensitive to the emotions of the adults around them and will imitate these reactions, especially in unfamiliar situations. As a parent, you can be a role model for your grieving child. Your display of real emotions, such as tears, controlled anger, or fear, does not harm them. What can be harmful is denying your grief, refusing to talk or not letting others talk about the death. While it is helpful for you to be open about your feelings, we all need to find the approach that suits us best. It is not possible to protect your child from reality but it can be possible to show, by example, how pain and loss are experienced and to ultimately survive.



There are no answers

Often mothers and fathers feel that if they can only answer their children's questions in the 'right' way, or say and do the 'right' things, then their children will not suffer. Yet you, as a parent, also know that **there are no satisfactory answers to your own questions**, no instant cure for your own grief. The same holds true for your children.

After the death of your child, you may find yourself placed in the position of trying to explain to your surviving child or children something that you yourself don't understand. **It is okay to tell your children, "I can't give you an answer, there is no explanation,"** or "No, it isn't fair that this happened to your brother or sister," or "I worry about that, too."

What is important is to **accept the way your child grieves**. Like adults, children show their grief in different ways. In whatever way they choose to express their grief - you may observe changed behaviour or 'acting out' - children need to know that their feelings will not be discounted or considered unimportant. Do not underestimate what most children can grasp about death. Depending on their age, they can usually absorb the information and adjust it to fit their understanding of what happened.

Saying Goodbye

After the sudden and unexpected death of a child, it can be very difficult for you to make decisions around what is best for your surviving children. Should they be given the opportunity to say 'goodbye' to their brother or sister, or will they find it too upsetting? Should they be encouraged to attend the funeral or service, or are they too young to understand? Every person responds differently and whatever you may decide about your child's involvement is the right decision for you.

Some parents may find it too hard to deal with the reality of the death themselves and so may assume that their children cannot cope with such an experience. Adults may believe they are protecting children by leaving them out of the discussions and rituals associated with the loss. However, most bereaved parents say they are pleased that they involved their children.

“*The nurse at the hospital was terrific. She asked us if we wanted the boys brought in. I'm so glad she said we could do this. They hugged and kissed him.*” Sharon

“*Jesse was on life support for 18 days. Aaron came in twice to see him. Holly and Kitty came in once. Aaron was smart and knew what was going on. He would just sit with Jesse. Holly just drew. Kitty held onto and felt his foot. She said, “I don't understand. I thought hospitals made people better, but Jesse died.”* Alex

“*Give the kids choices. If they want to see their brother or sister, let them.*” Sharon

“*Natasha held them after they died. She stroked their hair and sang to them, just as I had done.*” Natalie C



If a child is away when their sibling dies, it is very important to bring them home, difficult as it is, to be part of the grieving and planning from the beginning.

The funeral

Rituals are a part of life and can be of enormous help in building memories of the child who died. You may like to consider allowing children who are old enough, or who express a wish to do so, to be included in memorial services. It is important to explain to your child beforehand what a funeral is. It is also important to mention that rituals such as this give your grieving family and friends a time and place to remember the child who died. **It is an opportunity to say good-bye.**

“ People need to prepare children for what they will see and what will happen. Tell them what to expect. My children got a shock when they saw the little coffin. They expected to see a large, adult coffin.” Alex

“ The funeral director gave us a lot of good advice. We saw Lewis twice at the funeral parlour. Jacob held him and helped to dress him. He decorated the inside of the coffin with stars.” Kath

“ Kids might do unexpected things. During the funeral, Jacob just walked up to Lewis’ coffin, rearranged a couple of things on the top - and then just walked back to the seat. They don’t have to sit still like adults.” Kath

“ Kids need to be there (at the funeral). Don’t leave it up to the child to decide. I think each child has to be there. Aaron saw the coffin go underground. The girls didn’t see that. Children might get angry if they are not included.” Alex

“ I don’t think you can make any hard and fast rules about whether children should go to the funeral. Hannah did go to the funeral. She had no idea about what was happening, but I’m glad she went. For the rest of her life it will mean something to her that she was included.” Jenny

“ I’m not really glad (that I went to the funeral).” Matthew,
aged 8

“ After Molly died, Dan and Tim did not want to see her in a white box. Molly’s funeral was different. We didn’t want to see her in a coffin, so she was placed in a bassinet with the netting over it. She was cremated and we have her ashes above the fireplace in the kitchen. We had a party for Molly, and the boys enjoyed that because a lot of their friends came and they felt surrounded and supported.” Jill

“ Someone suggested that Jarrod write a letter or do a drawing to put in the casket. That seemed to be good for Jarrod. We included Jarrod in everything, I think you should listen and give the children choices about what they can do.”
Kylie



Hello and goodbye

Early pregnancy loss

When there is an early pregnancy loss, or miscarriage, it may be difficult for you to know what to tell your children. The task may be especially troubling if you have chosen to terminate a pregnancy for medical or other reasons. How do you tell a young child that they will never see the baby they were looking forward to? As described by one grieving parent, “You can’t even explain it to yourself; I don’t know how you can explain it to the children.”

Because it is so hard to find the right thing to say to a young child about a perinatal death, it may be tempting not to say anything at all. Although children may not have known for certain that their mother was pregnant, they most likely sense that something has happened to upset their parents. The best that grieving parents can be expected to do is to present the facts simply and clearly, taking into account the child’s age and experience.

Talking with your children about the infant who has died, even years afterward, can be helpful to parents and children. One mother tells of her son’s reaction to her six miscarriages:

“My son complains sometimes that he is an only child. I tell him that there might have been six others and look at all the fights you’d be having now. We sit down and talk about what their names might have been. He would say, ‘Oh, you wouldn’t call them this or that name.’ It is a good relationship. We’re very open with each other, and I always try to answer his questions.”

A multiple pregnancy loss

When a surviving child, or children, is from a multiple pregnancy, talking about the siblings who are missing can be a delicate task. Children who have survived a multiple birth can benefit greatly from knowing very early on about the circumstances surrounding their

birth. In this way, you can help them gain a realistic idea of what might have been and to reassure them of their completeness.

“It is important to make it real and tangible. I say to Layla that she had a twin sister but she’s not here. I show her a photo and tell her that Chloe was in my tummy, too.” Lyndal

“Max, who will be three in March, has started talking about his twin, Oliver. He seems to be quite aware and interested when I talk about the two of them – how they were identical and therefore looked the same.” Rachel

“I often point to my stomach and explain to Layla: “Your head was up here and Chloe’s was down here and Chloe’s feet were touching your head. Maybe she was giving you a tickle.” Lyndal

Neonatal loss

When a baby is stillborn or dies in the days or weeks after birth, it can be very difficult to explain to your child why the baby you gave birth to will not be coming home. Children may be introduced to their new brother or sister through a range of medical equipment from humidicribs to life-support systems. As difficult as it may be, allowing your child to see the baby may help them feel they are the big brother or sister they had hoped to be, and always will be.

“We had to explain to Natasha that Joshua was sick and that the doctors weren’t sure what was wrong with him.” Natalie C

It can also be beneficial for brothers and sisters to see how sick their sibling is and that doctors are trying to do everything possible.



When a baby or young child dies suddenly and unexpectedly

When a baby or young child dies from SIDS, accident or sudden onset illness, the following guidelines may help you in supporting your other children:

- **Tell your children the truth as simply as possible.** If it is too hard for you to talk about what happened, a family member or close friend may be able to help you with this.

“*Jackson was 15 months old when he died from SIDS. It is very hard trying to explain to a 4 and half year old and 7 year old why this happens.*” [Toni and Richard](#)

“*We told our boys that our baby died from something called SIDS. We do not know what causes it, but it will not happen to you or to Mummy or Daddy.*” [Jill](#)

- **Children need constant reassurance of their parents' love and affection.** This, however, may be very difficult for you, especially in the early days when your own grief is so acute.

“*We were as honest and truthful with Dylan and Mitchell that we could be. We involved them in everything. It was important to us that we didn't neglect them because they were hurting in their own way just as much as we were.*” [Toni and Richard](#)

- **Try and include your children in the events surrounding their brother's or sister's death;** for example, they can be asked if they would like to see the baby, go to the funeral, do a drawing or write a story.

“ They drew pictures and picked out special things for Jackson which we all put in his coffin with him.” Toni and Richard

- Children need reassurance that they were not responsible for the death.



Common grief reactions of children

Although your child's reactions to the death of his or her sibling will be unique, there are certain common emotions that are expressed in the grief process by everyone, including children. The following are some common reactions of children to death and loss.

Anxiety and fear

Anxiety is a very common reaction in children following the death of a loved one. When somebody close to them dies, a child's sense of security in the world may be badly shaken. They may fear that they themselves, or someone else close to them, will die. They may worry there is something wrong with them or that their bodies will cease to work. Your children may cling to you or other adults around them and seek frequent expressions of love and reassurance. Some bereaved children find it hard to cope with change or ordinary problems.

“Dylan was worried about going to sleep in case he didn't wake up like Jackson.” [Toni and Richard](#)

“Jacob cried. For days after, the house was swarming with people. Jacob never left us. I had him with me all the time.”
[Kath](#)

“Natasha still gets anxious. Sometimes she doesn't tell me about any tummy aches or bumps in case it means something much worse.” [Natalie C](#)

Don't be too worried, as things will improve over time.

Sadness

In some cases, grieving children may show a decrease in activity, becoming very quiet and introspective, expressing feelings of sadness, daydreaming, or crying a lot without being able to explain why. This is normal and natural. Younger children have a short sadness-span and are usually not sad for long periods at a time.

“*Jacob used to cry when he was in bed. He would say ‘I miss Lewis.’*” Kath

“*In the first few days after Molly died, there were times when I thought my two sons, Dan (10) and Tim (8) were drifting away from me. At one stage, Tim was sitting on the floor outside our bedroom window, and he was counting -34...35...36. It turned out he was counting the number of people who were coming into the house. I felt we were losing our boys then.*” Jill

Sometimes, the child reacts in response to the parent.

“*Often, if I cried, Jacob would cry, too.*” Kath

Remember that some children never cry, and that is okay, too.

“*Dan and Tim are entirely different characters. Dan is the quiet one. He never really cried. I worried about him bottling things up. He was never comfortable with me crying.*” Jill

“*Give them choices, they can cry or not.*” Jill

Regression

After the death of a sibling, young children may revert to behaviour or habits they had previously grown out of. Some of the changes that may be noticed in a bereaved child include bed-wetting, taking a bottle, thumb sucking, demanding to sleep with the parents or fearing to be left alone with babysitters. There may be sleep problems, nightmares or a reluctance to go to bed or get up. Older children may seek the closeness of adults and become clinging in their own



way, behaving more childishly for a period. In most cases, these patterns are short term and your child will move on with the help and understanding of loving adults.

“ I felt jealous of him because he took most of my mum and dad’s attention away from me. And when he died, I thought maybe I had done it.”

“ Kitty, 5 years old at the time, was traumatised. We found out later that when Jesse was discovered, and while the ambulance was there, Kitty was hiding under the bed. She had heard the screaming and saw the flashing lights of the ambulance. From then on, until receiving counselling, Kitty regressed. She was clingy, cried all the time, wet her bed, and could not be apart from me at all. When Jesse died, the bottom dropped out of her world.” Alex

Guilt

It is not uncommon for surviving siblings to feel guilty because of angry remarks or feelings of resentment they may have had towards the child who died. They may, for example, resent all the attention focused on that child before or after the death. Surviving children may also feel guilty about not behaving ‘better’ in some way, or that something they did caused harm to the child or may even have caused the death. A child may even feel guilty at being alive when the sibling is dead. Children need to know that even if they had angry thoughts or feelings about their brother or sister who died, these did NOT cause the death.

“ My boys said, ‘Do you think we killed Molly; because, remember we split the bunks the day before? Did moving the furniture cause Molly to die?’” Jill

“ I felt jealous of him because he took most of my mum and dad’s attention away from me. And when he died, I thought maybe I had done it.”

Anger

Anger and 'acting out' is another common reaction among grieving children. Anger may take different directions and can be shown as anger at the person who died, at God for letting it happen or at others and themselves for not preventing the death. Sometimes you may be held responsible for what happened, and anger might be expressed towards you. A child may find release from the new and scary feelings of grief by acting out, by regressing or by being especially irritable. These behaviours, though worrisome to caring adults, are normal.

“ I felt a lot of guilt and anger towards my mum. I blamed her for having a child that I got attached to.” **Melissa**

“ My daughter would yell at her friends and storm off. I talked to her about anger and how I was angry, too. I told her it wasn't her friend's fault, it wasn't mine or Daddy's fault and it wasn't fair to yell at her friend like that.” **Natalie C**

Children, especially young children, are mostly concerned with their own needs and often show anger when they feel these needs might not be met. Children need to know that it is okay to show anger as long as it is not hurtful to themselves or others.

Physical symptoms

As with grieving adults, children's bodies react when they experience grief. Physical complaints such as headaches, stomach aches or sore muscles are all known to appear in some grieving children. You may notice changes in your child's sleeping and eating habits and he or she may experience bad dreams or nightmares.

“ Our boys, aged 8 and 10, wanted to be with us and so we slept four in a bed for the first couple of weeks.” **Jill**



Shock and disbelief

Sometimes children may not believe that a death really happened and may act as though it had not, and some children may appear not to show any emotion at all. When your child does not immediately react with strong feelings, this can be confusing. You may find yourself concerned about the fact that your child does not cry. But this may be a normal shock reaction, also common among adults. What has happened has to be taken in, step by step, and this helps to prevent your child becoming emotionally overwhelmed. It is a necessary and helpful protection mechanism that helps us to cope with extreme situations.

“*Tell them that whatever they feel at the time is okay.*” Jo

Changes in relationships

Relationships with brothers, sisters and peers may become more difficult. There may be more conflict, competition, aggression or withdrawal within these relationships. You may also notice changes in the way your child relates to you. They may become more demanding, possessive, irritable, withdrawn or uncommunicative.

“*If your child withdraws from you, they still need positive reinforcement about how you feel about them. Telling your child you love them and are there for them might seem obvious, but I recall a time that Natasha was surprised to hear she could tell me what she was feeling.*” Natalie C



Ways to help your other children

It is possible to reassure your children that you will be okay, even though you are sad now. Give them a reason for your sadness – such as how much their brother or sister was loved and wanted and is missed. Avoid telling your children that everything is fine when they know that it isn't. They want the 'real' facts and to be talked to 'like adults'. You may find it helpful to say something like: *"We are all sad that Emily died and we don't understand why she died. We will always remember her but we won't always be sad."*

“ At this stage you think you will always be sad, and you want to always be sad, to do justice to the child who has died.” [Kath](#)

Tell your children the facts in an age appropriate way. Speak to your child with honesty and in language he or she can understand, using simple, easily understood language. In the context of telling children the truth, it is best not to try to soften the finality of death, at the same time trying to ensure that your child is not unduly frightened. Use the words 'dead', 'died', and 'death', hard though it can be. With young children, suggestions that the dead person has been 'lost' or has 'gone to sleep' may lead to unnecessary fears. Explain to very young children that death means that the body no longer works, that is, the person can't breathe, move, see or feel anymore.

“ Be honest, and answer everything irrespective of how difficult it is. Even though you feel you can't find the words.”
[Jenny](#)

“ It's very important to be honest with children. You just can't say that someone has gone to sleep. I have always used the words 'dead' and 'died' when we have been talking about what happened. We shared everything.” [Jenny](#)



With an event as tragic as the death of a child, **relatives and friends can be helpful** by spending time with your children and listening to their concerns. Especially in the initial days, it is too much to expect that you will have the energy to respond all the time to your other children's needs. If it is difficult for you to speak about what has happened, encourage another adult whom you and your child trust to do so.

“ In the days immediately after, it was really important to have someone one-step-removed from us to spend time with the older boys. My sister Jan just sat with one of our sons under the trampoline. Just sitting there under the trampoline with someone helped him.” Jill

Remember that in the coming months and years, there will be many opportunities to discuss the death and its impact on your children. The sensitivity you gain through this tragedy will be valuable for a lifetime.

“ It is vitally important for parents to realise that their children's adjustment and understanding of their sibling's death will not be achieved in a short time. It will be built upon over years. This is a good thing and should alleviate some of the guilt initially felt by parents that they haven't done a good job of helping their children.” Jenny

When you are speaking with your other children, **try to share as many facts as possible** surrounding your child's death, repeating them as needed. If it is difficult for you to speak about what has happened, once again, encourage another adult whom you and your child trust to do so.

“ It's important to find out what they remember, one to one, but it's so hard to do. We feel so stretched and exhausted. Children are amazing. Even though Steph was only 18 months old, I sat her down and talked about Danielle and what had happened because she was in the house and missed Danielle's presence. I made a point of telling her so she felt included. I was shocked by how much she seemed to remember.” Mel

Continue to show visible signs of love, support and caring to your surviving children using physical signs such as hugs and cuddles or warm verbal expressions of support or concern.

“*Being a close-knit family helped. We moved the girls’ beds into our bedroom for six months. After six months, they were happy to move back into their own rooms.*” [Josie](#)

“*I wrote about Joshua and Aiden, so I wrote about Natasha, too, and read some to her. I needed her to know I didn’t just love them.*” [Natalie C](#)

Make a special effort to really listen to what your children are saying or trying to say. If possible, allocate special times for your bereaved children so that they can ask questions and express their feelings. Children often stop asking questions that reflect their concerns because they know that such questions can make you sad.

“*Mitchell would leave the room if he didn’t want to talk at that time, but we were always available when he did.*” [Toni and Richard](#)

“*They missed Molly desperately but they were really aware of our emotions. We learned we really had to listen to them, and not take anything away from them.*” [Jill](#)

“*We talked about it as a family and that helped.*” [Alex](#)

“*It’s so important to let them follow their heart. Sometimes, they don’t want to talk to us about it. We can’t pressure them, but be able to listen when they want to talk.*” [Jill](#)

“*I had to change the prayer I said with Kitty. It was ‘If I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul will take...,’ I realised later that this prayer really upset Kitty, and we say a different one now.*” [Alex](#)



One of the best ways to communicate with your children is to play with them, to sit with them, watch their play and join in at some point. Often children will play out things that are happening in their lives or the feelings they are experiencing. By joining in aspects of their play, you have an opportunity to describe and name their feelings. It is often during play that your children's misconceptions about what has happened and their unanswered questions may start to emerge. Young children respond to play with dolls and puppets and, while playing, might communicate more easily with you. As with an imaginary telephone conversation, it is often easier for a child to 'talk' when he or she is pretending to be someone else.

“ My boys were given calico dolls, their Jared dolls. Dean got his friends to sign it and Adam drew a happy and sad face on his, together with Jared's name and his own. The dolls are now well worn and well loved.” Sharon

Looking at photos, drawing, writing and reading may also provide opportunities for children to talk about their worries or concerns.

“ We always read books to the boys. They would choose. Sometimes they spoke about Molly then.” Jill

It is possible to create a book that is unique to your family by using a combination of photos and drawings. Books like this are very personal and will be treasured by your children and can be re-read and examined as they grow older. Reading books is another form of play that many children enjoy and is often a part of everyday family interaction. There are books about death that can be read with children. Other things you might like to encourage your children to do include drawing pictures or writing about the baby or child who died.

Not all parents are comfortable with this kind of play with children and may find other ways to communicate with their children. The idea is to search for opportunities around play to encourage children to express their own feelings and reactions.

“ We’ve all sat together and written stories about Jared. One of the stories is ‘That Twinkling Star is my Brother.’ Red Nose Grief and Loss gives that book out to families.” Sharon

“ Kitty writes letters to Jesse and draws pictures of the whole family. Jesse is an angel with a big broad smile. He looks the happiest of all of us.” Alex

“ He needed an outlet for his emotions. He needed to do something physical. Just letting him run seemed to help.” Mel

If you can, ask your children what they are thinking and imagining.

This is helpful to address any misunderstandings or unnecessary fears. It is amazing and useful to hear explanations that children have put together from their own imaginations and experiences.

“ At one point, when we drove past the Melbourne General Cemetery, Hannah said, ‘Are babies all in there?’ She thought cemeteries were full of babies. I took her around the cemetery to where Samuel is buried and pointed out that most people who were buried in there were old when they died.” Jenny

“ Adam, who was three, went around asking women, ‘When is your baby going to die?’” Sharon

“ When Hannah was three we walked past an open grave ready for a burial the following day. Hannah asked me: ‘Will I die and be put in a grave?’ I had to say ‘yes’, but that she would not die until she is very, very, very old. I didn’t want her thinking that it could be soon.” Jenny

“For adults to understand the way a child is thinking, they should talk normally, as if the child was a person and not too young to understand.” This excellent piece of advice, which was given by a 10 year-old girl, again reflects the need for children to be taken seriously. At the same time, it can be hard to recognise and pick up on your child’s questions without being intrusive. It takes patience, watching,



listening and a sense of timing. Because a child says 'no' to talking at one moment, does not mean there will not be another, more opportune time.

“ Nick would help me to do the gardening and while we were working, he would often talk to me about Gumba. 'Gumba liked gardening, Dad.'” Paul

If you are able to give a name to your feelings, it can be very helpful to your children in trying to understand their own emotions. This can be straightforward and simple: “I am crying because I feel very sad” or “I am very sad because our baby died.” If this is too painful, a relative or friend might help to explain these same feelings to your children, to help them understand what you are feeling.

“ I always tried to explain to Jacob why I was crying. Often, I just could not get off the couch. He would answer the phone for me. I used to say to him 'I am sad because Lewis has died.'” Kath

“ Sometimes, I would fly off the handle and smash things. I explained to Jacob that it wasn't anything he had done. I didn't want him to think it was him who upset me. I would say to him 'Even though you think I am angry at you, I am not. I'm just upset that Lewis has died'. When I calmed down I always sat him down and apologised to him for my behaviour.” Kath

“ I spoke to Nick and said, 'When you're sad, just give me a hug.' A few times when I've been sad, he said, 'You just need me to give you a hug, don't you Mum?'. So it's like this understanding that we have, that there is something we can do. When I'm sad, you can hug me and when you're sad, I can hug you.” Mel

“ When I cry, I explain that these are my Molly tears.” Jill

Encouraging children to talk to each other about their sibling who has died may be helpful, as grieving children can be a great source of help and comfort to one another.

Red Nose Grief and Loss provide opportunities for bereaved children to get together. These include children's activity programs and groups for bereaved adolescents. Contact Red Nose Grief and Loss about this.

“ Aaron said that he didn't know anyone with a dead brother – so we brought him to the Children's Program (at Red Nose Grief and Loss), where he met other children who have had a brother or sister die.” Alex

“ Most importantly, the children have fun. It is a happy program.” Jill

“ When I came for the first time, I was scared that I would be wrecking my children's innocence. Instead, I saw other kids who are 'further down the track', and this gave me confidence that my kids will be okay in the future.” Parent attending Children's Program

If a child's needs or fears seem to last unusually long or seem unusually severe, a professional counsellor may be helpful. Children need to know there are 'safe places' and trusted people who can help at a time like this. Contact Red Nose Grief and Loss for more information about sibling counselling and support.

“ Going to a counsellor helped Kitty for a while. She felt special. She seems to have felt overlooked previously. It was good for her to talk to someone outside the family. She now goes to drama which she really enjoys.” Alex

As your children grow, they may want to discuss what has happened and try to put the event into a new perspective at a new life stage. A bereaved child's view of their brother or sister who has died may change over time. They may also grieve for new losses within the relationship as they mature. A youngster, for example, may miss their



sibling as a playmate whereas an adolescent may miss their sibling as a confidant or practical supporter.

This re-visiting may be triggered by the birth of another baby, someone getting married, a birthday or another death, even the death of a pet.

“ Dan was really affected by September 11th. He is aware of the fragility of life now. He cried a lot over that.” [Jill](#)

“ We've had twins since - Emma and Riley. Once, Emma fell over. My husband's voice sounded scared. Dean really freaked. He immediately thought Emma was going to die. These things trigger things for kids.” [Sharon](#)

“ Natasha was deeply affected by the Asian Tsunami. She was bothered when the young siblings of her friends started Prep. She notices milestones her brothers aren't reaching and commented that she should have been a Grade 6 Buddy for one of them.” [Natalie C](#)



Ages and Stages

The way in which children may respond to the death of their brother or sister is influenced by many factors. These include the meaning of the relationship (protector, rival, ally, only sibling, playmate), your living child's personality (sensitive, outgoing, highly anxious, resilient) and the age and developmental stage of your children. Remember, however, that not every child in a certain age group understands death in the same way or has the same feelings. You know your child best. The following gives a rough guide as to what children of a particular age may experience.

Infants and toddlers

Very young children can be quite **sensitive to changes** in their emotional and physical environment. They may sense that you are reacting differently or are not able to provide them with the same care and attention as you usually do.

Possible behaviour

- Infants and toddlers may fuss more
- They may regress and begin to suck their thumb or wet the bed again, or become more clingy
- Young children may want to be picked up and carried, rather than walk
- They may also express confusion that their brother or sister is no longer present

What do I say? What do I do?

- **Your infant or toddler may need extra cuddles and extra time** with either you or other trusted care givers
- Although this can be difficult, try to **keep as consistent a routine as possible**



Pre-schoolers

Children younger than five years of age usually do not understand that death is final. This may lead them to search for the sibling who has died, and to ask questions like: "When will my baby sister come back?"

Younger children think in very concrete terms at this age. It is best not to use replacement words that your child may take literally, such as saying that the person is 'asleep' or 'gone on a long journey.'

Speaking of the child who has died as 'lost' may, for example, lead your surviving children to search for their sibling or to wonder why a search is not taking place. Talking about death as 'a long sleep' is also not helpful, as your child may then be scared of going to sleep. When these same terms are applied to living people (for example, "Daddy is asleep"), children may become fearful that they, too, have died.

“ We used the words ‘gone’ and ‘box’ (instead of coffin), with an explanation, because we could not bear to say ‘dead’, ‘died’ or ‘coffin’ in the context of my son, Lewis.” [Kath](#)

‘Magical thinking’ plays a big role in children at this age. Some children may think that they somehow caused the death, particularly if they had been naughty or thought or said something nasty to their sibling.

“ Hannah was 2 and- a- half years old when Samuel died at the age of 3 months. She was very young and had no idea about what had happened ... We had put Samuel down for his afternoon sleep. He had been asleep for 2 hours and Paul went to get him up. I saw that Hannah and one of her little friends had drawn on the wall with texta. She had never done that before. I just leant down and said to her “Hannah, you must not draw on the wall”. It was then that we heard Paul discover Samuel. We all just stopped still ... stunned ... frozen in time. I just knew ... bedlam. Two days later, Hannah came and took me by the hand. She walked me to the wall where the texta had been. She said ‘Hannah draw on wall. Mummy cry. Daddy cry.’

"I said to Hannah 'Yes, you did draw on the wall, but that is not why Mummy and Daddy are crying. We are crying because Samuel has died'. But Hannah continued to talk about her drawing on the wall for months. She couldn't understand that her drawing on the wall did not cause Samuel to die." Jenny

Younger children may also feel they can undo the death by good behaviour and that if they wish or pray *really* hard they can miraculously bring their brother or sister back to life.

Possible behaviour

- Pre-schoolers have a matter-of-fact curiosity about death and can ask questions that you may find confronting.

“Dean said, ‘If he came back today, and I opened his eyes, would he see me?’” Sharon

“When we went to see Jackson at the funeral parlour, we walked into the room and Mitchell ran over to Jackson, only to stop in his tracks and take a few steps back. We think he was expecting to see him alive.” Toni and Richard

- Young children do not remain sad for long and may alternate rapidly between crying and playing.

“Jarrod came to the funeral. He carried flowers behind my husband, who carried the casket. Jarrod cried briefly, but then was playing and laughing minutes later.” Kylie

- Children's behaviour may regress. Examples include bed-wetting, sleeping difficulties and/or clinging behaviour.
- Death and grief may become a part of play activities; for example, young children may play 'funerals' comfort their crying dolls or draw their sibling in 'heaven'.
- Some children may be irritable and withdrawn and show signs of insecurity.
- Young children may feel bewildered and physically search for the sibling who has died. Remember that adults experience this, too.



A two-year-old girl asked her mother where her little brother is now. The mother replied, "He is in my heart", to which the two-year-old responded by pulling up her mother's blouse, hoping to find her baby brother there.

What do I say? What do I do?

- **Explaining death to children of pre-school age should be simple, honest and factual.** As hard as it may be, it can be helpful to use the word 'dead' and to tell your child that their brother or sister who has died will not return.
- Young children also find it hard to grasp that the body has stopped working. They still think that when you die you go on breathing, thinking and feeling. Questions such as: *"Who will give the baby milk up in heaven?"* are not unfamiliar. If you can **explain that the baby or child who has died will not need to eat or breath any more**, your surviving child may feel less anxious about providing food and air.

“ We were talking about being hungry and Layla said: 'I have a hungry tummy and Chloe has a hungry tummy.' I explained to her that Chloe doesn't have a hungry tummy because, when you die, your body stops working and you don't need food or drink any more” [Lyndal](#)

- Perhaps you could explain to your child that his or her brother or sister died because, for example, they were 'very, very sick', or for reasons that we don't understand, and **not as a result of anything your child may think he/she did.**
- Young children may also need **reassurance that they will not die because their sibling died**, and that someone will be there to take care of them.
- Reassure your child that being sick and **going to hospital does not mean people always die.**
- **Comforting, touching, being consistent and talking, perhaps repeatedly, about what happened** can all be helpful.

School-aged children

Children may experience a difficult transition period where they still want to see death as reversible but are **beginning to see death as final**.

However, they may believe that **death happens only to other people**.

Possible behaviour

- Children may be curious about death and burial rituals and may ask detailed questions which are very difficult to answer.
- It is not unusual for the primary school-aged child to imagine death as a bogeyman or a ghost. They will sometimes play games of pretending to die.
- Like adults, anger over the death is a natural response in this age group. Sometimes, the anger is focused on certain people for 'causing' the death. These targets may be God, the doctors, nurses or anyone involved with their sibling's death. They may even take out their anger on you or themselves for not preventing the death.
- You may find your children being less willing to express their feelings, preferring to keep their grief to themselves. As one parent commented:

“ Just because she's quiet doesn't mean she's always OK.”

“ Dylan has experienced many different emotions, which are very hard for him to understand, and for us to explain to him that what he is feeling is normal.” Toni and Richard

- Like some adults, children may take time to absorb the reality of what has happened and might not appear to be immediately affected by the death.

“ Holly said: 'Now that you have more time, I can go horse-riding again.' She didn't understand that death is forever.” Alex



- Children are quick to blame themselves.

“ Dean blamed himself. He was in the tent beside Jared.
Dean said: ‘but I was right next to him. I should’ve known.’”

Sharon

- Children may sacrifice their personal needs and not ask questions that reflect their true concerns because they worry about their parents and want them to feel better.
- Your child may experience disturbed sleep or appetite.

“ Sometimes I have nightmares...but I don’t want to tell Mum or Dad because they are already upset.” Tim

- School performance may be affected.
- Older children may be concerned about what their peers think and may be anxious about being seen as ‘different’.

These are not uncommon or abnormal responses and are ways children work through their own grief.

What do I say? What do I do?

- You will, as parents, need to be sensitive to your child’s level of understanding. Use simple language to **explain honestly what has happened** and be guided by your child’s ability to absorb this information.
- **Answer questions and encourage the expression of a range of feelings.** If a child asks a question that you find hard to answer, ask them what they think. This will allow you to have a clearer understanding of your child’s reflections on grief.
- Be available but also **allow your child to have some time alone.**
- **Talking to children about grief and the feelings it evokes helps them learn that their experiences are normal and natural,** and that feelings of sadness, anger and helplessness can be faced.
- It can be valuable to **have all your children together when breaking bad news.** The more outgoing children will ask the questions that the more reserved will not.

Adolescents

Normal adolescence is a time of physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual and sexual changes. It can be a bewildering stage without the further upheaval of loss and the stress of grief. It is little wonder that so many grieving teenagers feel misunderstood and isolated.

Adolescents are usually able to reason and **understand the abstract concept of death**.

Like adults, **they have a sense of the finality of death** and can participate in traditional mourning practices.

At this stage in their lives, they **often feel that they themselves are immortal** and this can make death harder to accept.

Adolescents begin to **reflect on justice and injustice**, search for spirituality, and engage in philosophical talk with friends.

Possible behaviour

- Some adolescents can ask searching questions about the death of their sibling and death in general. Others are more private and may talk little about the death.
- Some adolescents may want to deny death, to shut it out, as it is a reminder of his or her own mortality.
- Some young people may become depressed; others may become irritable, impulsive and engage in risk-taking behaviour.
- Anger is normal and 'acting out' may occur.
- Adolescents may experience intense and overwhelming emotions, but they may try to suppress their feelings because of the uncertainty of how their responses will be interpreted by others. As a result, the mourning process can be a very private one for adolescents and is likely to occur intermittently rather than continuously. Feelings may also be hidden from peers so as not to be singled out as different or abnormal.
- On the other hand, adolescents seem more likely to seek support from their peers than from their families. This is natural and normal in terms of their development. Encouraging your teenager



to get involved in a peer support group may be helpful. Perhaps you could talk to a Red Nose Grief and Loss counsellor for some suggestions.

What do I say? What do I do?

- Let your adolescent know **it is okay to express his or her grief in his or her own way**. There is no set 'style' of grieving.
- Although you may feel helpless observing your child in grief, **do not underestimate how much a hug can mean**, even to your otherwise 'grown-up' teenager.
- It can be very helpful for teenagers to know how you are really feeling. **Talk openly and share your feelings** - even crying together can be therapeutic for everyone concerned.
- To show that you care, that you are at least trying to understand, it is important to **focus on good communication, which means a lot of listening**.

Conversations can often be effective if adolescents don't feel pinned down. Important conversations, for example, can take place in the car, doing chores or playing with pets. In this way, eye contact can be avoided by the adolescent and they may feel more in control of their emotions.

Most adolescents resent being pushed into counselling, even though they know it's because their parents are worried about them. You, as a parent, may feel better equipped if you seek information and share your concerns with the counsellor and take this back to your family.

- **Recognise and respect the significance of anniversaries and special days**. Hurt feelings might re-surface or intensify. Perhaps you could ask your teenager how he or she wishes to observe this time and if you can help in any way.

Teenagers speak

By listening to our bereaved teenagers, we can get a better understanding of how best to support them in their grief. Reflecting their question back to them for their opinion can guide you as a parent on their concerns, beliefs or issues.

The funeral

“ I don't think I could have handled going to the funeral because my mum was in so much pain. Saying goodbye to my sister – I did it by myself when I felt I needed to. It was more of a private thing.” [Melissa](#)

“ I'm glad I went. It was great to see so many people showing me support. I did a reading and we all contributed and it was a final thing I could do for my brother before he was buried.” [Tom](#)

“ One of the most important things we did was we all gave Glenn a kiss goodbye in the ambulance. That was a really good thing to do.” [Carl](#)

“ I was four when Joel died. Many people were against me going to the funeral because I was so young. I was naughty at the funeral...but Mum told me to go and I was glad I did.” [Natalie](#)

What helped

“ Me and my older brother David carried his coffin out of the church and this made me proud in a way, through the sadness. It was a good thing, a final goodbye.” [Tom](#)



“ We all wrote letters to Andrew and he was buried with them and that was great.” Tom

“ Writing down your feelings helps a lot...I wrote an essay on the death of my sister. I felt such relief that some of the pain had been let out.” Melissa

“ I remember writing a letter and putting it on top of his coffin and it was buried with him. That was pretty special.” Tom

Family and friends

“ My parents were so torn up that they found it hard to speak to us kids. It was hard to get a good grip on what had happened.” Carl

“ When Andrew died, all I wanted to do was be over it. ‘I said, I am not going to wait a year to get over this.’ A week later, I was back at school. It was like returning to normality. I think I paid for it a year later when it came close to his anniversary. I hadn’t allowed myself to go through the grieving process. All I wanted to do was to forget about it. My friends were great and wanted to talk about it, but I shut them out.” Claire

“ None of my friends would go near me. They didn’t know what to say. No one was really talking to me...it felt a bit lonely at the time.” Tom

“ Everything was chaos at home and I just wanted to get back to something normal and stable – and so I went back to school on Monday. I said to my friends, ‘my sister died’ but I didn’t want to talk about it. There was too much instability in my house.” Melissa

What helped

“All I wanted was to speak to someone, not my parents, not counsellors, but to someone else, preferably my own age, who knew what I was going through. I didn't want to think I was the only one.” [Claire](#)

“I felt a lot of pressure to act in a certain way. All I wanted was to be by myself and sort it out my own way...I didn't want to feel pressure to act a certain way or go to certain places or be the stereotype of someone grieving. I didn't want a time put on my grief.” [Melissa](#)

“Don't take anyone else's advice, because they have no idea what you are going through.” [Claire](#)

“I was allowed to feel the way I wanted to feel and if I didn't want to talk, I didn't have to, and if I did, there was always someone there for me. That helped me a lot.” [Melissa](#)



Kindergarten and School

Childcare, kindergarten or school can be like a second family to children. Returning after the death of their sister or brother will probably be difficult, but there are some things you can do to help make the experience positive and supportive.

Contact your child's teacher

In most situations, you might find it helpful to let teachers and childcare workers know about what has happened so that your child can be offered appropriate support away from home. Most teachers make genuine efforts to be helpful and understanding with a child who has been through a distressing experience. If this is too hard to do, ask a relative or close friend to do this for you.

“*Mitchell was in pre-school and we couldn't imagine going through this without the love and support we received from his teachers. The pre-school placed a park bench in the grounds with a lovely plaque dedicated to Jackson's memory. It's lovely to think of the children playing around it.*” [Toni and Richard](#)

“*After Corey died, a plaque was installed at the kinder play area. It is placed at a level that 3 and 4 year olds can see. I think that was a lovely thing to do for Corey, and for us.*” [Carinna](#)

“*Dylan was in 1st grade and they couldn't have been more understanding to his and our needs. The principal came to the house with a plant from all the teachers that we have planted in our special 'Jackson Garden.'*” [Toni and Richard](#)

Prepare your child for questions and remarks

Other children, being curious, are likely to ask pointed questions and may not be considerate of your children's feelings. Discussing the possibility of questions and answers with your children may

be helpful. Let them know that it is okay to refuse to answer any questions that are too private or too difficult.

Contact the school counsellor

Again, explain the situation and ask for help. Maybe your child could visit with this person once a week for a while. Establishing a relationship like this may be useful in the future when the need is felt.

“A few weeks after Jared died, Dean started school and Adam started kinder. No one at the school or kinder knew us or that Jared had even existed. This made it all the harder; it would’ve been easier if people knew.” Sharon

Inquire about a support group for bereaved children

Meeting with other children who have had similar losses can be very helpful. Feelings are easier to share in such a group. You may like to contact Red Nose Grief and Loss for information regarding support groups for bereaved young people.

“Jarrod attends the Seasons Program at school. That seems to help.” Kylie

Remember, children express their grief in diverse ways. Your child may display some of the following behaviours:

- Socially inappropriate behaviour in class
- Anger towards teacher or classmates
- Poor grades, due to inability to concentrate or preoccupation with the loss
- Physical ailments, such as headaches or stomach aches, either prior to or during school
- Social isolation (they might be afraid the questions their friends may ask will make them cry at school)

These behaviours are a normal and natural part of a child's grieving process. Usually, they are temporary but may be seen ‘on and off’ over a long period. With understanding and support, your child can be guided through this difficult time.



Getting through your day

Next to the death of a parent, the death of a brother or sister can be the most traumatic event to occur in a child's life. When a child dies, most of the support from family and friends is focused on the parents. Parents themselves are often so overwhelmed by their loss they can barely help themselves get through the day, let alone support their children.

Automatic pilot

It must seem like an almost impossible task to show children that life, although changed, goes on, when one's own grief is overwhelming – yet, it is important to try to maintain a routine and to keep things familiar so that your child can see that life is secure and predictable.

“We were in limbo. We went to the Royal Children's Hospital with Molly. After a while we knew we had to get back to the boys. We needed to be there for them. You go into autopilot for a while.” Jill

“The shock is so severe that you act normal. There are blind reactions, panic, but to all the world you are acting normal.” Alex

“I was in such a state. When I bathed Hannah, for example, I wasn't really 'with her'. When the next Medicare card came, Samuel's name wasn't on it. I slid down the wall sobbing. Hannah came to me and patted my back and said 'It'll be alright, Mummy.' Sometimes I felt that Hannah was the adult. I'd be sobbing into a pillow and Hannah would come to the bedroom door and say 'Stop it!'” Jenny

“I handled the kids' grief badly. We were desolate and could give nothing to the kids. I remember I sent Linda to school without a cardigan. It was a cold day, but I couldn't even think.

Our family's structure just fell apart. Ryan was a perfectly healthy little boy. It was totally unexpected. I was devastated. I collapsed after Ryan died. I couldn't deal with it. I just tried to keep up the routine. I didn't want to answer all of the kids' questions. And I didn't want them to be hurt by this tragedy. In hindsight, I didn't support the kids well. There was very little around to help them. Given what I knew then, I don't think I could have done it differently." Jo

Kids come first

“ Amidst this overwhelming sadness you have to keep going and keep doing things. You have to keep their routines going. I would have loved some time to myself, but with kids you can't have that.” Jill

“ Dean was 5 and about to start school. Adam was 3 and about to start kinder. I put all of my energy into supporting the boys. I didn't seek any support for myself (although I should have). I didn't want my boys to be mentally scarred.” Sharon

Guilt feelings

“ You do worry about your other children. In those early days, I said to myself 'I'm never going to yell at them again.' But of course you do. And then you feel shocking.” Jill

“ I still hate the fact that she suffered all that time. It is horrible for a small child to go through something like that.” Jenny

“ You wonder, don't you, what we have done to their innocence.” Jill

“ I felt terribly guilty that all these kids have been affected. Not only Jacob, but all the kids who knew Lewis.” Kath



“A few weeks after Samuel died, Hannah spilt a drink of milk. I went ballistic! I smashed the bedroom up. I was hyperventilating. Hannah came to the door and said ‘I’m sorry I spilt my drink.’ I was shattered. I tried to explain that it was Samuel’s death, and not the spilt drink, that had made me so upset.” [Jenny](#)

“My Mum came and she was holding Molly. The boys crowded around her but they didn’t hold Molly. I regret that now, but I didn’t know any different then.” [Jill](#)

Over-protectiveness

Having experienced one tragedy, you may be tempted to ‘spoil’ your children; both those you already have and the ones that come later. You may also be extra fearful for their wellbeing. These fears, which may lead you to be over-protective and anxious in your relations with your children, are quite natural.

“I’m over-protective to a degree. I still check their pulses and they are teenagers.” [Jill](#)

“I always check to see they are breathing.” [Kath](#)

“I tell the boys that they can ride their bikes only in one area. Dean says, ‘I know you worry, Mum. It’s because of Jared.’”
[Sharon](#)

“As Kyle is the only surviving child, he is aware of how I worry about him. I can be really open with him now. Much more than when he was little.” [Jo](#)

“I think the older they get, they begin to understand why we are like that.” [Jo](#)



Looking after yourself

You may need to get support yourself before you can help your children. There are many ways to express your grief. The most important thing is to find what works best for you.

Some ideas:

- Finding a friend, relative, counsellor or support group with whom you can talk freely.
- Looking after your basic physical needs, such as eating well and getting some exercise.
- Journal writing as a way of recording your thoughts and feelings. Sometimes just 'getting it out' in this way is helpful.
- Having a massage from a professional, a friend or from your partner. This may relieve some stress and help you feel cared for and relaxed.
- Finding release in creative activities, such as drawing, painting, sculpting, writing or playing music.



Changes over time

Grief takes a lot of your energy and it is tiring. Many parents find that it can take up to two years for a normal routine to resume after the death of someone significant in your child's life. There are, however, no hard and fast rules. Each family's experience will always be different.

“My boys are not damaged. They have done it in their own way and in their own time” Jill

“It never gets better, it gets easier.” Anonymous

“They need to be given the opportunity to continue talking about it. It's not over in 6 months; it's not over in 12 months. With your kids, communication needs to be left open. It's very important.” Paul

“How kids understand what happened changes as they grow. My boys let out a bit more as they grow.” Jill

“Hannah's grief came later. When she was about 5 and a half she asked what Samuel is dressed in. She wanted to know what clothes he had on. She wanted to see him and know what he looked like. I said that he would not look like how we remember him. She questioned us further and I said it was like when a flower dies and shrivels up. I showed her the photos taken after he died of Hannah holding him and kissing him 'Goodnight'. These photos were a godsend. She cried and cried as she looked at the photos. Her grief was delayed till then. I knew then that she had just realised that he would not be coming back.” Jenny

“Now, she still sometimes gets emotional and questions 'Why?'” Jenny

“ Jacob has always been a sensitive, mature person. He always looks after his brothers. Sometimes, he goes through patches where he’s quite serious, and I wonder how he really is. It’s five years now, and I don’t know how long it takes.... He remembers a lot. He remembers things about Lewis, but also the trauma. He sometimes says he remembers his Dad and I sitting on the hearth crying.” Kath



Your beliefs

Taking time to listen to your child respects and validates his or her opinions and beliefs, and provides a starting point for further conversations about what your child may believe happens after you die.

Explanations concerning life after death can lead to confusion. Try to be consistent in what you tell your child and what you believe - for example, to say that the baby is in heaven when it is obvious from other statements you have made that you do not believe in such a place, can cause confusion in the child's mind. On the other hand, when you have beliefs that give you comfort, sharing them with your child can be reassuring.

“When Kate died, I couldn't answer all of the children's questions. I was trying to figure out my own beliefs. I questioned everything. It's important to say, 'I don't know' – therefore your kids don't see you as invincible. No-one really knows.” [Belinda](#)

“They hadn't really known anyone who had died, except the dog. They've got this idea of Heaven, because they wanted to believe in it. They say he's up in the stars. It's what they want to believe.” [Sharon](#)

“When our little boy asks, 'Where is Molly?' I say memories are in our hearts.” [Jill](#)

“Many families use the concept of heaven and the child who has died being a star.” [Belinda](#)

Death is a mystery - perhaps the most profound mystery of human existence. Children, like adults, will continue to grapple with its meaning and relevance all their lives.



Anniversaries and birthdays

Anniversaries, birthdays, religious festivals, Mother's Day, Father's Day, family celebrations and other special days may be especially difficult. As the days draw closer and closer, you may dread how you and your children will react. You may be worried about how to handle all the feelings that these days might bring up.

This may be a confusing time for children. They may be afraid of what other people are going to expect of them. They may be afraid to ask the questions that are bothering them. They may feel guilty for looking forward to the holiday or they may just want to avoid the whole holiday time. Because you seem sad, they may think they should feel the same way and they may be worried when they don't.

Family customs can be painful or a comfort around special holidays. Ask yourself what is best for you and your family. Younger children may draw comfort from family traditions. Older children may want to change everything because the memories are painful. Give each other choices. Whatever works for you and your family is right for you.

“These traditions are really important because they give some sense of normality to the kids.” Jo

“Ask them what they want to do on anniversaries and birthdays. We donate a book to the school library on Linda's birthday, and we donate to Red Nose Grief and Loss on Ryan's.” Jo

There is much less anxiety if you and your children know ahead of time what to expect. Start talking about your plans before the special day.

There are many things that you can do with your children:

- You can make a collage of the child who died with pictures, written messages, a lock of hair ... anything special.



- Looking at family photos together can be an opportunity to talk about the child who has died, share memories and to remember the good times.
- Choose a personal belonging or buy something that represents the child to give to each of your surviving children. Explain why you chose that item. This will give your children something tangible to hold on to.
- Children can make a memory book of all the things they remember about their brother or sister. They can put in letters, drawings or photos.
- On birthdays and anniversaries you can have a cake complete with candles. Everyone can make a wish and blow out the candles together.

One mother said:

“ We lost twins at birth. When it was time for their first birthday, I asked my 5 year old if we should make a cake. He thought for a minute and then he answered, ‘We’d better make it angel food.’”

“ We go out for the day on Jared’s birthday. We have a birthday cake, candles and balloons.” [Sharon](#)

- Visit the cemetery and take flowers, notes or balloons.

“ On birthdays and anniversaries we have balloons and have a family tea. On the anniversary, we always take the day off and go to the cemetery.” [Sharon](#)

“ Ian and I always take the day off on Molly’s birthday. Tim always has, too.” [Jill](#)

The festive season can be very hard, reminding you of who is missing. You may want to change some things, start some new traditions or keep some of the old ones. Do what you can to create a gentle feeling about the holidays.

“ At Christmas Eve, we leave lollies in Jared’s stocking and Santa leaves a plant for the garden.” Sharon

“ We still hang Lewis’ stocking at Christmas and have a special star for the tree.” Kath

Other ways of remembering that families have found helpful:

“ Going to the Red Nose Memorial Service helps. Dan and Tim went for the first time this year. They were thrilled that they had done it for Molly.” Jill

“ Hannah usually goes to the Memorial Service. Sometimes she cries. We always do something special after the Memorial Service.” Jenny

“ Kyle doesn’t talk about Ryan, but he does come to the Memorial Service on Red Nose Day. He used to come to the Children’s Program at Red Nose Grief and Loss and that helped him.” Jo

“ We do rituals for Kate like lighting candles.” Belinda

“ We have a Fairy Garden for Molly. We have a tree out the front with fairy lights. The boys light candles underneath the tree.” Jill

Music can be helpful as a way of expressing emotions.

“ It wasn’t until I played a song by Eric Bogle, called ‘Elizabeth’s Song,’ that she began talking to me about Jesse and asking me questions. I was so relieved when she started telling me what she remembered.” Alex

Special days can be opportunities to help each other through the grief all of you share. Sharing memories may bring tears, but these are healing and okay, especially on these special days.



Another baby

It is understandable that, like you, your children may become anxious and worried when you have another baby. Often, after the death of a sibling, children may be very protective of their mother during a new pregnancy, and show great concern about something happening to the new baby. Your child may require some reassurance from you that you will be careful.

“Jared asks questions about whether we will have another baby. But I don't know whether we will be able to have another baby or when that might happen, and his questions are really hard to answer.” [Kylie](#)

“My older girls seem to have the same fears that I have. They mother this new baby. They don't allow her to cry.” [Josie](#)

“Since the birth of our subsequent children, we often see Dylan sitting watching them while they are sleeping making sure they are alright. It seems no matter how much we reassure him that they will be OK he still has that underlying fear.” [Toni and Richard](#)

Some young children see life and death in a very matter-of-fact way. You may come across comments such as: “If this baby dies too, then you can have another one.”

Other children may experience and express feelings ranging from anger and fear to guilt and joy.

“When I knew Mum was pregnant with Patrick, I was pretty annoyed. I was quite angry because I was thinking we have had enough.” [Tom](#)

“I asked: ‘Is this baby going to die, too?’” [Tom](#)

“ When Jack died, I kept on praying that he would come back and when I found out that my mum was pregnant, I thought it was because I was praying... I was happy that I was going to have a sister.” Steven

“ I felt that if I came into contact with another baby, something bad would happen.” Melissa

“ I was afraid to become attached to another baby and it took me a long time to get over that.” Melissa



The bond of subsequent children

It seems clear that the brothers and sisters of a child who has died, whether they were born before or after the tragic event, feel a bond with this child. If you decide to talk to your subsequent children about the baby who died, speak openly, honestly and reassuringly. Most children treasure their knowledge of a sibling who came before them.

“ Thomas has a real connection with Samuel, even though Thomas never knew him. Thomas sees Samuel as his little brother.” *Jenny*

“ My twins are now 6. I'm grateful that they haven't had to see their parents devastated. They know that Molly has died. They have shown her photo to the class during 'Show and Tell'. They always say that she is their little sister. While they kind of accept it, recently there was another Molly at school. They said 'Molly's back. Can we bring her home?' ” *Jill*

“ Hannah (surviving child) told Thomas (subsequent child) 'You wouldn't be here if Samuel hadn't died.' Thomas took it very hard. We had to explain to him that we love him very much, and that we would have had him even if Samuel hadn't died. We didn't want him to feel second-best.” *Jenny*

“ Riley and Emma talk about Jared, even though they never knew him. We have his photos and footprints, and his teddy is on our bedside table. I always talk to them about him. They used to say things like: 'Jared must have made the rain, Mum.' ” *Sharon*

“ Angela said: ‘I want to go up in an aeroplane and be with Corey.’” Carinna

“ The twins see Jared as their little brother, even though had he lived he would now be 8.” Sharon

“ We’ve had two more boys since - Harris and Fraser. Harris sometimes says weird things like ‘Oh, we’ve had another brother, but he’s dead.’ Sometimes, he has said ‘It’s very sad that Lewis died, isn’t it, Mum?’” Kath



Four important things to remember to help children understand and cope with death:

- Be honest
- Be loving
- Be available
- Be consistent

“ There are no rule books to follow after a child's death. You only learn by doing.” Sharon

“ We used to have this Friday night ritual where we would have fish and chips and all snuggle up together under a doona and watch a video; the kids loved it. After Danielle died, it was hard to do this, but we started again because it was important to Nick and Steph. To Nick, it was like, that's what we do. It reinforced his security. In a family that's been torn apart, it was re-establishing a sense of security, that's what we did, that's what we still do, the core of our family is still here.” Mel

“ We just do the best we can. We did the best we could at the time.” Mel

“ Helping our boys deal with this is the most important thing to us. We can only hope that out of this tragedy they grow into better, more caring and more understanding young men.” Toni and Richard

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