Siblings: the forgotten mourners

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Sibling grief: disenfranchised

• By self: through protecting parents
• By family: consumed with illness and the loss
• By community: who see them as strong and unaffected
• Others under-estimate the impact of the loss
Siblings

• **Unique relationships** with deceased
• Often **disenfranchised** in the context of the family grief
• Often **silenced** by family scripts
• It becomes the **grief of a lifetime**
• It can cause **long term problems** if not addressed
• They can carry a ‘**death wish**’ related to the feeling that they are not good enough
• They very often **protect their parents**, not letting them know how they feel or what they know of an illness or death
• It affects their **identity**: place in the family, role etc
Sibling Loss

• Suffer for long periods of time
• 7-9 years post death they report grief manifestations
• Grief is affected by:
  • Closeness of sibling
  • Family cohesiveness
  • Level of self esteem
• Adjustment is affected by unaddressed needs during the siblings illness/death/crisis
Mediators of their mourning process

• 1. Death and rituals of death
• The relationship of the child to the deceased
• The functioning of parents and their ability to continue parenting

• Family issues- family stressors
• Support
• Child’s own personality, age, and understanding of death
A child’s reactions to loss

- Shock and numbness
- Regression or maturation
- Yearning and longing
- Anxiety and fear
- Physical symptoms
- Anger and guilt
- Shame
- Sadness and loneliness
- Behaviour
- Schoolwork
Child in the family context

- Child must be considered within a family
- Family belief systems
- Coping styles in family
- Family scripts
- Family dynamics
- Family grief dynamics
- Family roles
- Family position
Sibling grief involves 4 elements

- “I hurt inside”
- “I do not understand”
- “I do not belong”
- “I am not enough”

» Davis (1999)
“I hurt inside”

- Sadness
- Anger
- Frustration
- Loneliness
- Fear
- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Guilt
- Jealousy
- Embarrassment

- Crying
- Withdrawal
- Attention seeking
- Misbehaviour
- Complain of aches and pains
- Pick fights easily
- Argue
- Nightmares
- Fear of the dark
- Loss of appetite
Adult response

• Comfort and console
• Accept their feeling /behaviours as normal grief reactions
• Let them express in their unique way
• Sharing one’s own thoughts and feelings offers hope for a better future
• Without this children may stifle their feelings
“I do not understand”

• Make sense of death depending on their cognitive development
• If they are not assisted to make sense of death in their own way then they can be very confused
• Their confusion compounds the anxiety they feel and their anxiety adds to their confusion
Adult response

• Explain and interpret all that is happening for the child
• Remember confusion and ignorance add to the hurt
• Provide honest information in ways that the child understands
• Flag up information in advance so children know what to expect
• They learn that it is okay to ask questions
• They learn that not all questions have answers
“I do not belong”

- Disruption of family routines
- Distressed parents
- Unfamiliar visitors
- Overwhelmed siblings
- Want to help but don’t know how
- Feel uninvolved – detached
- Feel different from peers
- Criticised for behaviours
Adult response

• Children need to be included and validated
• They can manage when they have an active role, when they are prepared in advance.
• Feel part of the family, with a valuable contribution to make
• If excluded, feel left out and may respond through acting out, risk taking, avoiding home, withdrawing into themselves or from schoolwork and activities
“I am not enough”

• Feel the child who died was the favoured child
• Feel they are not special
• Think they should have been the one to die
• Feel no matter what they do is never enough to please parents and make them happy again.
Adult response

- Acknowledging their loss and reassuring they too are special
- Reassure and confirm through words and actions that they have their unique place in the family
- Help them feel loved, appreciated and valued
- Need to understand Child’s reaction may be to over-achieve, taking on the identity and characteristics of their deceased sibling, excelling at meeting the needs of others, or becoming unrealistically good
Remember:

- Bereaved children **protect** their parents.
- They **grieve in a different way** than adults.
- They **dislike exclusion**.
- They are **honest and frank** about their feelings.
- They **need natural supports** in their grief.
- Only **a small few** will require professional support.
- Remember all children **belong to a family**.
- They hold their **unique meaning** of the loss.
- They can become **disenfranchised**.
- They need to find their **identity** after this loss.
- Grief in a child is **not** a once-off event.
What do bereaved children need?

• Choice
• Information
• Involvement
• Reassurance
• Routine
• Affection
• Acknowledgement of feelings
• Allowed to express feelings
• Role models
• Time to reminisce and remember
Nature of mourning in children

• Intermittent
• Intense
• Overwhelming
• Triggered by:
  – Activities
  – Time of day
  – Music
  – Lack of an event
• Appear unaffected in the interim
• Function at a much deeper emotional level
• Often disenfranchised
When grief becomes complicated in children

- Persistent anxiety
- Persistent aggression
- Social withdrawal, from friends and activities
- Self blame or guilt about the death
- Self destructive behaviour: risk taking
- Self harming
- Suicidal behaviour
Need to:

- Story the event
- Story the relationship
- Story the adjustment
- Story the legacy that is left
The Irish Childhood Bereavement Care Pyramid

**Time and Developmental Stage**
- Level 1: Explanation & Reassurance
  - Occasional physical symptoms
  - Questioning
  - To have routine and schedules
- Level 2: Normalise & Enhance Coping
  - Regressive behavior
  - Constantly questioning
  - Diminished coping
  - Feeling isolated
- Level 3: Additional Needs
  - Symptoms over time
  - Impacts on day to day functioning
- Level 4: Complex Needs
  - Suicidal ideation
  - Self-harming

**Service/Support**
- Information & Guidance
  - Accurate and honest age appropriate information
  - Easily accessible via websites, leaflets, bereavement helplines
  - Family and community based
- Organised Bereavement Support Services
  - Meeting others with similar experience
  - Helps develop coping strategies
  - Preferably community based

**Competencies**
- Expert Knowledge & Skills
  - Experience in childhood mental health
- Advanced Knowledge & Skills
  - Academic qualification
  - Substantial clinical experience

**Family Context**
- Most
- Some
- Few
Dual Process Model

Loss oriented (Managing Loss)
- Grief work
- Intrusion of grief
- Breaking bonds
- Relocation of deceased

Restoration Oriented (Managing day to day)
- Attending to the changes
- Doing new things
- Denial
- Avoidance of grief
- New roles
Interventions include:

- Examining the changes
- Telling the story
- Exploring the relationship
- Re-membering
- Exploring feelings
- Exploring issues that make the death difficult
- Self-esteem building
- Continuing bonds
GROWING AROUND GRIEF
HERE IS A NEW WAY OF THINKING ABOUT GRIEF AND RECOVERY:

THIS CIRCLE REPRESENTS A LIFE THAT IS TOTALLY CONSUMED BY GRIEF.

ONE SHOULD ACCEPT THAT THE GRIEF WILL NEVER ENTIRELY DISAPPEAR, BUT OVER TIME IT WILL BECOME A SMALLER, MORE MANAGEABLE PART OF LIFE.

EVEN THOUGH THE GRIEF IS STILL THERE, A NEW LIFE EXPANDS AROUND IT; ONE IS ABLE TO GROW AROUND GRIEF.
Our surviving children not only lost a sibling, but they’ve also lost the mother and father they once knew.

Everything is different now.
References

- The Irish Childhood Bereavement Network (ICBN)
  www.childhoodbereavement.ie
- Standards for supporting bereaved children and young people