

# When My Child Dies

*We trust that beyond the absence, there is a presence.*

*That beyond the pain there can be healing.*

*That beyond the brokenness, there can be wholeness.*

*That beyond the anger, there may be peace.*

*That beyond the hurting, there may be forgiveness.*

*That beyond the silence, there may be compassion.*

*That through compassion, there may be understanding.*

*That through understanding, there is love.*

Author Unknown

## Last Moments

**After your child has died, you may want to have something special for your child to wear at the hospital. What favorite outfit do you have for your baby? What are your child's favorite clothes? A baseball jersey? A ballerina costume? Red shoes? A favorite t-shirt or hat?**

**Is there a special blanket or favorite toys/items to leave with your child?** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Ask questions about what your child will look and feel like after she dies. How do you want to see your child for the last time? It is okay to leave right after she dies, and it is also okay to stay in the room for as long as you need.** \_\_\_\_\_

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## Last Moments

### What happens to my child's body after I leave the hospital room?

Your child's body will be taken to the hospital morgue. You may take several days, if needed, to make plans for a funeral home. Your child's body will be kept in the morgue until these decisions are made.

### May I take my child's body from the hospital?

There is a process you must follow and each state has its own guidelines. Ask your hospital staff to assist you if you are interested.

### What if I cannot afford a funeral home?

The hospital staff can contact a social worker or chaplain to help you explore ways that are comfortable for you.

- Please know that funeral homes are a business. The hospital staff may give you options in choosing the best places for your family. It helps to learn about the options different funeral homes offer in your area.
- Be aware that if cremation is desired, not all funeral homes are equipped to do this.

- You may ask the funeral director to inform others if you prefer donations be made to a favorite charity or fund.
- Foundations can easily be created through an attorney. Instead of flowers/gifts, you may have money donated for a one-time or ongoing gift to a specific cause. This can be a great task to give to a close friend or family member who would like to help.
- You may want to request certified copies of the death certificate. If needed, most people accept copies of the death certificates.
- Find out from the funeral director the newspaper deadline to submit an obituary.
- Talk to your spiritual leader if you wish for them to lead the funeral.

**Tip:** Do you need help in making funeral arrangements? Ask your social worker to help you with resources. Sometimes there is financial support available for those in need. There will be a staff member available if you would like guidance and support.



## How will you leave your child for the last time?

Sometimes a member of your child’s health care team may offer guidance and other times a family member or close friend can step in to help you. One suggestion is to begin calling close friends and family members if you are able.

Who can you call to be with you?

Is there a staff person who would be available to help you make the first call?

Do you want to designate someone else close to you to begin making phone calls?

Who will help you get through each moment after you leave the hospital?

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*“After Lissy died I needed to know my daughter would be transported with care. I wanted to ensure that when my daughter was away from me, those that were with her would be PRESENT and not talking about the baseball game last night. I pinned a note on her shroud that said... Very Important Person, please transport me with dignity.”*

– Resa

“We shall draw from the heart of suffering itself the means of inspiration and survival”  
– Sir Winston Churchill





# Caring for surviving children

The death of a child strikes at the very heart of a family. Bereaved parents often feel helpless to provide guidance and comfort to their surviving children because parents' emotional and physical resources are severely stressed. Children are often referred to as the "forgotten mourners" because the attention of family members and friends is directed toward the parents.

Although surviving children have feelings of grief similar to those of an adult, they often express those feelings differently because they are young and do not have the same coping abilities as adults. They may seem outwardly confused and defensive, and unwilling to share their grief with their parents, preferring to depend upon their peer group or others for support.

A surviving child is reacting to the loss of a sibling and to the changed behavior and interaction of parents and others who are close. Reassure your children that the depth of grief you are feeling does not lessen your love for them.

**Tip:** Plan a memorial "Celebration of Life" in which your surviving children and friends can participate, making them feel a part of the family's grieving process. You all may find new memories and fun things about your child during this process.

The following suggestions come from bereaved parents, surviving children, and professionals to assist bereaved parents in understanding and meeting the needs of their surviving children.

## Caring for surviving children

Be aware of your child's level of understanding as it relates to the death of a sibling:

- 0-18 months old—has no conception of death, but may respond to parental reactions to the loss.
- 18 months-3 years old—possesses the early beginnings of grief and mourning, but perceives death as temporary.
- 3- 5 years old—continues to see grief as temporary, with difficulty understanding the permanence—needs concrete explanations of what death means.
- 6-8 years old—understands their sibling will not return and death is universal (it could happen to me).
- 9-12 years old—understands the reality of death and is curious about biological aspects of death and details of the burial.
- 13 years and older—fully understands the concept of death.

Explain truthfully to your children, on a level they can understand, what caused the death of a sibling. Answer questions simply and directly, giving answers to build on later as the child ages.

## Caring for surviving children

### Explaining the Concept of Death

To avoid fear in a younger sibling that he or she may also die, explain that there are reasons why a person will die: That person is very, very, very sick; that person is very, very, very hurt.

Oftentimes, religious sentiments intended to comfort children can be misinterpreted, causing confusion.

Avoid phrases that can be easily misunderstood by children:

- The sibling who died is not asleep
- God did not come to take the sibling to heaven
- The child was not “called home.”

### The Sibling Relationship

Your surviving children had a close relationship with their dead sibling. There were times of great love and there were times of great anger. Children often feel guilty about these times of anger and may even feel that in some way this caused their sibling’s death.

### Parental Role Modeling

Children learn how to express grief by observing their parents’ mourning process. Therefore, it is important that parents acknowledge their child’s

death, display appropriate emotions, and give their surviving children permission to do so, as well. While you should not be afraid to show an appropriate level of emotion in front of and with your surviving children, you need to reassure them that although you are grieving, you will still be able to take care of them. If they can see the extent of your grief, this will confirm their own feelings, that it is okay for them to cry, be sad, show anger and even laugh.

Parents often idealize their dead child, causing siblings to feel they can never live up to the standard of love lavished upon their sibling’s memory. Parents should take care not to make comparisons with surviving children that could lead to feeling that they are unworthy. Surviving children might feel the parents wish they had died instead.

Reinforce the positive things your surviving children do. Spend quality time with them.

While it is difficult, parents must balance a fine line not to be overprotective or overly permissive. Routines should be continued whenever possible.

Many children find it difficult to talk openly about their feelings with their parents. This does not mean they do not want your input. When your children do open up to you, if even briefly, listen carefully to what is said and the concerns that are voiced. Do not yell,

# Caring for surviving children

criticize, or judge if they say something you consider off-base or out-of-line. This may be your only chance to gain their confidence.

## Some Typical Reactions

Children often find it easier to “mourn at a distance”—to show little emotion at a sibling’s death, only to mourn in private away from other people. Tears may still appear at the most unexpected times. Use these openings to support them in their grief and acknowledge how difficult it must be for them to lose their sibling.

- Younger children may at first make jokes or continue normal play as a distraction. This is not abnormal nor reason for concern. Do not scold them.
- For those a little older, it’s okay to cry and feel depressed. They’ve lost a great deal.

**Tip:** Have children write a letter or draw a picture to be buried or cremated with their sibling.

- To copy some of their brother’s or sister’s habits and interests, while still being themselves.
- To live “in the past” for a while to keep

alive the memories.

- To forgive themselves for fights, arguments, and mean things they said or did to their brother or sister.
- To go on living.

## However, watch for destructive reactions:

- Use of drugs or alcohol.
- Acting out of frustration through reckless driving or skipping school.
- Doing things out of anger to hurt others because of the pain they themselves are feeling.
- Experimenting with sex just to feel close to someone.
- Discontinuing activities that meant so much to them.
- References to suicide.

## Suggestions for helping your children

- Children need parental support and a chance to be heard, acknowledged, and understood if they are going to work through the grief process.

## Caring for surviving children

- Share the belongings of the child who died, perhaps giving each surviving sibling something “for the moment” and something to put away for adulthood like a photograph, favorite book, CD, or piece of jewelry.
- Help your children to channel their grief into positive activities such as drawing, writing in a journal or diary, and reading. Seek their advice in ways they may want to signify their siblings such as creating a memorial fund, and help them accomplish these goals.
- If you find, after a time, that your children don’t seem to be adjusting to their new lives, don’t be afraid to encourage them to talk with a qualified school counselor, a psychologist or psychiatrist who specializes in bereavement.

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[www.compassionatefriends.org](http://www.compassionatefriends.org)

*“Talk with your living children truthfully. Do not deny them the action of experiencing the death process. We always talked ‘Life’, but when that wasn’t going to be true, we talked ‘Death’. The ‘healthy’ children have definitely been in the shadows, and have been dealing with*

*challenging issues of identity and competency all through their sibling’s illness. There is a lot going on and the parent who is grieving is usually not the one who should be helping their own children. There are support groups for children dealing with those losses. Hospice offers a support group for children, and [www.grievingchild.org](http://www.grievingchild.org) lists support groups by state. But, kids, agreeing or not, need to have a safe place to share their feelings.”*

– Robin

**Tip:** Use these suggestions to also talk with cousins, friends and other children who were close with your child so that they may be helped with their own understanding and grieving process.





## Friends and Family

Allow yourself to accept care from others, as they are comforted when allowed to help. Their help will aid you and your family during this difficult time.

Often people feel unsure of how to help. Friends and family may benefit by healing and finding closure when asked. So when they ask how they can offer support, the following are suggestions to give:

- Listen to you and sometimes don't say anything. Sometimes words are awkward and unwelcome and the presence of your support system is what is important. Friends and family members can acknowledge, rather than minimize, your grief and heartache.
- Go out with you on your first outings so they can answer questions instead of you.
- Help make funeral arrangements and tend to the details.
- Remember your child's birthday and anniversaries of death.
- Use your child's name in day-to-day life.
- Bring meals and help with household chores until you are ready to cope with day-to-day

activities.

- Pray or organize support from your church, temple or spiritual site to sit with you.
- Write special memories of your child and compile them into a memory book.
- Provide financial help—you may not be working and your expenses have piled up. You've been eating out, making long distance telephone calls and now the medical bills are beginning to arrive:
  - gift certificates to grocery stores and restaurants
  - gas cards
  - pay bills
  - organize community donations
  - assist with medical insurance claims
- Sometimes not always asking what they can help with, but learning to anticipate your needs and just doing something for you. You do not need to make any more decisions than you have to and answering "yes" to help may be difficult.

## Friends and Family

Remember: Sometimes you may have to tell people that there are days when talking about your child is too much. Know that it is okay to say, "This really is not a good time for me to talk about this."

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*Silence is okay "True friendship comes when silence between two people is comfortable."*

– Dave Tyson Gentry

*"Encourage friends and family to talk about your child and recall memories. This is helpful immediately after the death and also for the months and years following."*

– Robin

**Tip:** Suggestions to give to friends and family on what to say to you:

*"I'm so sorry"*

*"How can I help?"*

*"We've been thinking of you so much."*

*"Do you want to tell me about \_\_\_\_\_ name of the baby/child's*

*birth? Personality? Likes/ Dislikes?"*

*"I feel so sad for you."*

*"I can't begin to imagine what you're going through, but I want you to know how much I care."*

(Mayo Clinic Complete Book of Pregnancy & Baby First Year/ Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. 1994. First Ed. William Morrow and Company, Inc.)





## Your relationship with your partner

- Remember that every parent grieves differently, but decisions can still be made together.
- You will need each other for support. Try not to spend excessive time away from home or your partner.
- Express care through touch and expression for one another.
- Realize the strain this will place on your relationship and don't be afraid to seek help.
- Think of some symbolic ways to remember your child: planting a tree/bulbs, speaking, establishing a scholarship, planning an annual activity, creating traditions.
- Fundraise in their name.

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*“You are a couple, but you each grieve a separate path. You are both walking the same direction, down the same road, maybe brushing shoulders, but you can't even reach out and hold each other's hands. It is a very individual and separate journey. Do not expect your spouse to see through your eyes, they may never. But accept their way of walking the path and realize that you may never understand how they are processing this death. As difficult as it is, try to not lose sight of your relationship as a committed couple.”*

– Robin

*“Grief is a very self-centered, personal emotion and it is important to have respect for others' means of grieving.”*  
–Cindy







