

Helping Children Cope with the Death of a Sibling

This handout will help you explain death of a sibling to children and give you tips to help them cope.

Let children talk and listen to what they have to say.

Know that they may not want to talk. Let them know it is ok to ask questions, share their feelings and thoughts, and talk when they feel ready.

Find out what they **want** to know by asking basic questions. You can start by asking a question such as “What do you know about what is going on with (sibling’s name)?” By starting with a question, you can find out what they know.

Keep your answers short and make sure you answered what they are asking. Use words they can understand. Tell that truth.

If you don’t know an answer, don’t be afraid to say you don’t know. If it’s a question you can find out, find out together.

Answer the questions they ask with facts. Separate what is known and what is believed. Use concrete words like “died,” “death,” “dying,” and “dead.” Using phrases like “passed away,” “lost,” “gone,” or “sleeping,” can confuse children. They may think the deceased person will wake up or come back. It may lead to fear of falling asleep. They need to know that death is permanent.

Be patient. Anyone dealing with grief needs time to understand what happened and adjust. Children may ask the same questions over and over. They can also be overwhelmed and sad one moment, and silly and playful the next moment.

Offer children time to write, draw, or do other art projects. This may help them to express their feelings. Offer children time for physical activity. This can help release excess energy and emotions. Remember to maintain routines as much as you can, such as school, time with friends, and normal activities for the child.

Involve children in new family rituals to remember the child who died. This could be a special family outing, planting a tree, or creating a memento for your home.

Reach out to hospital support staff, such as child life specialists, social workers, health psychologists, and chaplains, for books and other tools to help you talk to your child and help them begin to cope.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person’s health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 12/2019 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing HF#7533.