

# the guide to helping children grieve

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a resource provided by: **VISITING NURSE**  
HEALTH SYSTEM



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# intro: the guide to helping children grieve

**t**hank you so much for reaching out to us in your quest to understand and provide care for your grieving child. First and foremost though, we are sorry for the loss that has brought you here, regardless of cause.

We truly care about you and hope the following information helps you to better understand and guide the grieving child in your life. In the pages that follow, you'll find content that addresses the needs

of infants, babies, toddlers, elementary age and pre-teen children. We have created a separate booklet that addresses the needs of teens and hope you find that helpful, too.

You'll also find answers to some of the most common grief questions asked of our team of bereavement professionals, though it's important to remember that each child's grief is as individual as his or her DNA.

Therefore, answers can and always should be tailored to the understanding and awareness of the child in your midst.

Remember, too, that this booklet is a guide on grieving children and is meant to give you a framework to work from. It's something to get you started. You can and should reach out to a grief counselor, your child's teacher, or others as you and your child both need and deserve a framework of support to help you throughout your grief journey.

In closing, may we each remember that in the eyes of a child, grief can feel like the most uncommon, uncomfortable experience he or she may ever go through. It's our role as caring adults to do our best to ensure that each child receives as much compassion, love and gentle support as we can muster, regardless of what we as grieving adults may be going through. It's often how we react, guide and mentor them throughout these early experiences that can set a framework for how they will grieve subsequent losses.

And therein lies great hope. Why? Because you are here, showing you care by reading and researching how to best help the grieving child you love.... and for many kids (regardless of age), one caring person can make all the difference in the world.

Thank you what you're doing to help heal the grief of the child in your life.

# your child is not alone: statistics on children and grief

by Dianne Gray

**“DEATH IS UNIVERSAL, BUT GRIEF, ESPECIALLY TO CHILDREN IS UNIQUE AND PERSONAL.”**

*Dianne Gray | Author, Grief Coach & Pediatric Palliative Care Advocate*

A child's first experiences with death occur by simply being a participant in life. Every day, parents, teachers and the media share news of lives lost, whether it was due to natural disaster, terrorism, illness or accident. When a pet, friend, or family member dies, the loss can create feelings of isolation. Children can feel that no one else has experienced what they are going through which can lead to the child feeling as if he or she is standing out in a crowd as “different.”

However, statistics show that children are hardly alone when it comes to experiencing the death of someone they care for or feelings of loss.

## **Just The Facts: Death and Loss Experienced By Children & Teens**

- In a study of 11 to 16 year olds, 78% reported that at least one of their close relatives had died. (Harrison & Harrington, 2001)

- In a poll of 1,000 high school juniors and seniors, 90% indicated that they had experienced the death of a loved one. (<http://nahic.ucsf.edu/downloads/Mortality.pdf>)
- One in every 1,500 secondary school students dies each year. (<http://nahic.ucsf.edu/downloads/Mortality.pdf>)
- 1 in 5 children will experience the death of someone close to them by age 18; (Kenneth Doka, Editor of OMEGA, Journal of Death and Dying)
- It is estimated that 73,000 children die every year in the US. Of those children, 83% have surviving siblings. (Torbic, H. "Children and Grief: But what about the children?" Home Healthcare Nurse. 2011; 29(2):67-69)
- 1.5 million children are living in a single-parent household because of the death of one parent. (Owens, D. "Recognizing the Needs of Bereaved Children in Palliative Care," Journal of Hospice & Palliative Nursing. 2008; 10:1)
- 1 in 20 children aged fifteen and younger will suffer the loss of one or both parents. These statistics don't account for the number of children who lose a parental figure, such as a grandparent or other relative who provides care. (Owens, D. "Recognizing the Needs of Bereaved Children in Palliative Care," Journal of Hospice & Palliative Nursing. 2008; 10:1)

Grieving In Schools: Nationwide Survey Among Classroom Teachers on Childhood Bereavement; Conducted by New York Life Foundation & American Federation of Teachers, 2012.

**Classroom teachers report that students who have lost a parent or guardian typically exhibit:**

- Difficulty concentrating in class (observed by 87% of teachers)
- Withdrawal/disengagement and less class participation (observed by 82%)
- Absenteeism (observed by 72%)
- Decrease in quality of work (observed by 68%)
- Less reliability in turning in assignments (observed by 66%)
- 69% of teachers currently have at least one student in their class(es) who have lost a parent, guardian, sibling or close friend in the past year. \*For more information go to: [www.ChildrensGriefAwarenessDay.com](http://www.ChildrensGriefAwarenessDay.com)

Why share this information with you? To help all understand that the children in our midst need and deserve quality bereavement care. They deserve to be heard, understood and loved.

# **grief & child development**

by Dianne Gray

In general, a child's understanding of grief and emotional response can be related to his or her developmental age.

## **INFANCY TO 2 YEARS OF AGE**

### *Understanding of death:*

- No concept of death
- Reacts to emotion in others
- Will react to the separation from the one who cares for them

### *Grief reactions of children infancy to 2 years of age:*

- Crankiness
- Tears, vomiting, toilet habits regress
- Clingy, regressive behavior
- Child cannot tell time but knows something is terribly wrong
- Child is capable of reacting to stress
- Nervousness
- Uncontrollable rages (as well as the normal "terrible two's events")

### *First step solutions:*

- Keep the child's routine intact
- Have someone else care for the infant/toddler if you're upset or unable to calmly care for him or her
- Speak calmly, gently and try to keep items familiar to the child nearby

### **3 TO 5 YEARS OF AGE**

#### ***Understanding of death:***

- No concept of death for self
- Age of discovery; child uses all five senses
- No abstract thinking; They hear you but cannot interpret information
- Child may engage in magical thinking or believe death is reversible
- Child has no concept of cemeteries or funeral rituals

#### ***Grief reactions of children 3 to 5 years of age:***

- Child may want to fix things for others
- Child may be accident-prone
- Frequent sickness
- Antisocial behavior
- Nightmares
- Compulsive behavior
- Expressive anger
- Regressive behavior
- Hyperactivity
- Recurring dreams: wish fulfillment, anger
- Dependency upon remaining parent

#### ***First step solutions:***

- State the fact that their loved one has died...clearly.
- Do not use euphemisms such as “grandpa went to sleep in heaven.”
- Be repetitive with the above clearly stated information

### **6 TO 10 YEARS OF AGE**

#### ***Understanding of death:***

- Child knows he or she can die
- Understands death cannot be avoided (esp. by age 10)
- Child understands death is final

- Child fears death
- Child is interested in specific details of death (what happens to the body)

***Grief reactions of children 6 to 10 years of age:***

- Conversations can be very fear-based
- Child may experience shame, anger, anxiety, guilt and sadness
- Child may worry about his or her own death
- Child may experience feelings of insecurity, clinginess, physical symptoms of illness/discomfort/abandonment

***First step solutions:***

- Provide consistent and repetitive assurance of your love and commitment to the child
- Allow the child as many choices as possible in making preparations for funeral rituals, daily routines, food choices, etc.
- Allow child to change his or her mind throughout as he or she may not be able to grapple with emotions her or she does not understand
- When possible assure the child of his or her own safety and unlikelihood of his or her own death
- Use specific language: The person “died” versus “passed” or is “sleeping in heaven”

**10 TO 13 YEARS OF AGE**

***Understanding of death:***

- Death is very personal
- Child has a realistic view of death
- Similar to those above for 6-10 year olds except more in depth

***Grief reactions of children 6 to 10 years of age:***

- May worry he or she is to blame in some way for the death
- May experience separation anxiety and need affection but may feel embarrassed by it.
- May lose manual skills
- Grades may fail
- May emotionally separate from the ones they love as a defense mechanism & as a feeling of self-preservation
- Sexual promiscuity
- Compulsive behavior
- Nightmares
- Truancy
- Secretiveness
- Antisocial behavior
- Destructive behavior

***First step solutions:***

- Attempt several shorter conversations, respecting attempts to push you away
- Respect differences in grieving style. You may be open and conversant. Your child may not be.
- Your child may attempt to heal through doing activities and then may attempt to converse with you. Respect his or her way.
- Explain that each person's grief is unique
- Discuss that they will enjoy life again and it is okay to feel happy again
- Please give permission for them to feel whatever they are feeling so the emotions can be shared and the grief ultimately healed
- Be honest yet respectful with age-appropriate discussion

- Find healthy ways to remember the deceased without idealizing this person (putting him or her on a pedestal)

## **TEEN YEARS**

### ***Understanding of death:***

- More adult thought processes evident
- Complete understanding of the permanence of death
- He or she may ponder the seeming injustice of death
- He or she may seem adult-like in the understanding of death but may not yet be able to understand other more philosophical aspects of death
- Teens may question fate as a part of the life experience

### ***Grief reactions of teens:***

- Isolation in an attempt to shield friends and other family members from seeing his or her feelings
- Self-medicating via drugs, alcohol or via over-eating in an attempt to numb feelings of grief
- Feelings may be very intense
- Teen may emotionally regress
- Teen may take on additional chores, work to “step up” and replace deceased family member
- Physical changes may occur due to stress: skin issues, weight issues (gain or loss)
- Forgetfulness
- Truancy
- Resistance to discipline
- Secretiveness
- Staying away or running away from home

- Compulsive behavior
- Sexual promiscuity
- Poor performance at school
- Insomnia or sleeping too much
- Destructive behavior
- Resentment of authority
- Anger or rage may erupt unexpectedly, leaving the teen surprised at his or her own behavior
- Nightmares

***First step solutions:***

- As much as possible, maintain routines and rituals while also allowing your teen space to explore his or her own feelings
- Attempt several shorter conversations rather than one long, intense one
- Remember teens are not adults; They are still maturing and should be respected as such
- Physical touch is important but ask permission first
- Encourage interaction with his or her friends, if it seems to help
- Ask specific questions like: “What do you miss most about your (friend/mother/father/brother who died)?”
- Avoid vague questions such as, “How are you?”
- Share specific memories to open conversation; “I remember the time we...”

**What are the warning signs for children coping with grief and what should you do?**

- Absence of grief for more than a few days
- Shows no emotion

- Aggressive, anti-social behavior or destructive acts toward property, people or animals
- Suicidal thoughts or actions
- Self-harm including cutting
- Repeated unwillingness to speak about the deceased (over a period of time)
- Prolonged dysfunction in school
- Prolonged accident proneness
- Engaging in addictive behavior

### **What to do if you are worried about a grieving child in your care?**

First and foremost, try to stay calm. Inflamed emotions only make it more difficult to either converse with the child at any age or with a professional who needs to help.

#### ***Then you could contact:***

- A grief or mental health professional in your area sooner rather than later
- Your child's school counselor
- Your child's pediatrician
- Local clergy
- Your local hospice grief and bereavement counselor, for either an appointment or a referral
- Your child's teacher
- If you suspect your child or teen is contemplating suicide: Immediately contact the area suicide prevention hotline or this telephone number for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline; 1-800-273-8255. [www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

# infant, baby and toddler grief

by Dianne Gray

“**ANY CHILD OLD ENOUGH TO LOVE IS OLD ENOUGH TO MOURN.”**

*Dr. Alan Wolfelt*

Yes, even babies grieve. This may surprise you but it is indeed, true. Research shows that infants who are just a few hours old bond and recognize their mothers' voices. Furthermore that attachment continues to grow throughout the first year of life. However, infants and toddlers are not developmentally mature enough to understand fully the concept of death. So what do they sense?

Infants, babies and toddlers sense anxiety, stress, sadness and/or change in the home. Even infants a month old can sense if someone is missing, though they do not understand the concept of death. They are also likely to be aware if a new person is present.

How do they respond to this awareness? By exhibiting changes in their bowel habits, and their sleeping, eating, or daily living patterns. They may be more irritable and fussy. Though this is normal, you may wish to check in with your pediatrician just in case. What can you do to help babies and toddlers coping with grief?

## **Focus On The Basics**

- Maintain his or her routine
- Food

- Shelter
- Love
- Comfort (pick up your baby he/she fusses; carry your baby with you a bit more)

### **Infant and Toddler Grief**

1. Hold off on other changes (crib to bed, removal of the bottle, potty training, etc.)
2. Consistency helps people of all ages cope with grief
3. Provide a physically and verbally affectionate environment
4. Ask for help if you're feeling overwhelmed
5. Pay attention to your own physical and emotional needs
6. Seek counseling or guidance from clergy or support professionals sooner rather than later.
7. Help the infant or toddler remember the deceased by saying his or her name.
8. Use simple language: Use the word "died," versus "sleep" or "gone" or "passed." "Grandma died and can never come back" is better than using a term that the child may grow to fear one day.

### **Resources for Helping You and Your Grieving Baby**

- Babble.com: <http://www.babble.com/toddler/talking-to-toddlers-death-of-relative/>
- Back Band Together: <http://www.bandbacktogether.com/explaining-death-children-birth/>
- Child Bereavement UK: [http://www.childbereavementuk.org/files/3214/0117/8931/Supporting\\_bereaved\\_children\\_under\\_5.pdf](http://www.childbereavementuk.org/files/3214/0117/8931/Supporting_bereaved_children_under_5.pdf)
- Child's Grief Education Association: [www.childgrief.org](http://www.childgrief.org)
- Grief Words: [www.griefwords.com](http://www.griefwords.com)

# myths about grief in children and teens

by Dianne Gray

**Myth: Children naturally “get over” the loss of a loved one.**

*Fact:* Yes, children are usually quite resilient and can adapt to loss and shifts in identity (for ex: if an older sibling died and they are now the oldest child in the household). However, while it is natural to feel grief, children often need help in understanding the process of change that ensues: new feelings of sadness, anger, guilt, frustration and the physical manifestations of grief.

**Myth: Children and teens need less time to grieve and mourn than adults.**

*Fact:* That’s not necessarily true. Children love with all of their hearts, which means they also

grieve deeply. However, they are also quite resilient and heal differently than many adults do. Full consideration should be given to understanding that children are not little adults and need guidance and support throughout their grief journey.

**Myth: Grief occurs in predictable, orderly stages.**

*Fact:* Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, psychiatrist and author wrote about “the Five Stages” in her book, *On Death and Dying*. She said, “People are not robots. They do not go through stages in an orderly fashion. People can go through all, none or some of the stages (denial, anger, depression, bargaining, acceptance);

**Myth: Infants and toddlers are too young to grieve and mourn.**

*Fact:* Any living being can experience grief and thus can experience mourning.

**Myth: Children & teens aren't affected by the grief of adults around them.**

*Fact:* Of course, they are. Adults often hide conversations about the death of a loved one or the ensuing sadness, which only confuses children who are naturally perceptive and intuitive... though they may not discuss their feelings or their sadness because they don't want to make anyone else even more sad.

**Myth: Children and teens who experience a traumatic loss in their childhood don't function well as adults.**

*Fact:* Most children are resilient and do well provided they receive counseling, have access to mentors, resources and/or others who surround them with

love and support. Advocacy work (volunteering) also helps.

**Myth: Children and teens are better off if they don't attend funerals.**

*Fact:* Children often benefit by going to the funeral of someone they love, depending upon the age and emotional wellbeing of the child. Funerals can provide a child the opportunity to say "goodbye" to their loved one and can also provide the opportunity to express their love to others about the deceased.

**Myth: Boys who cry are "weak" and boys don't need to cry as girls do.**

*Fact:* This is an outdated theory. Boys and girls alike cry as a normal, healthy expression of emotion and should be encouraged to express feelings of sadness and grief. Unexpressed emotions and pent up grief can lead to physical and emotional issues.

# grieving children: what helps? what doesn't?

*by Dianne Gray*

One of the most difficult things parents go through is watching a child they love endure the process of grief and loss. Death and the ensuing feelings of loss can signal the end of a certain innocence in children.

However, the journey that follows does not have to be a negative one. In fact, children have two things going for them: resilience and an innate curiosity that will allow them to mold and adapt to the “new norm” and the relationships around them following the death of a loved one.

To help children navigate loss successfully however, we need to be alert to both the verbal and non-verbal cues of grieving children of all ages. They truly need and deserve all of the love, guidance and support we can give them individually and collectively. We've outlined here a few common thoughts on what helps and doesn't help children grieve well. If we help them through their grief journey, they can emerge emotionally stronger and more resilient.

## **What Doesn't Help Children To Grieve Well:**

1. Projecting your adult fears onto your child. The child in your midst is just that—a young being who doesn't know how to handle or understand your fears. That holds true for most of life, but especially in grief.
2. It doesn't help to raise your voice or yell at your grieving child. It's understandable that you're upset, too, but you're the adult and your child is just that, a child. Grieving is hard enough for kids and screaming at your little one makes him or her feel more isolated than he or she already does. Remove yourself from the room if you must or call someone calming to come over and help you for a while if you need to.
3. Embarrassing your child in front of his or her friends. Kids often engage in “magical thinking,” meaning at times, they tell made-up stories that may surprise you. They may tell friends that their deceased friend, parent or sibling hasn't died...that it's a mistake. If you hear fabrications from your child, please be kind and gentle with him or her. There's no need to embarrass your child in front of his or her friends. When you are alone with your child, ask why the story was told. Always, assure your child you love him or her completely. Remind him or her that you are going to be there throughout this journey.
4. Hiding your tears. Tell your child that you cry, even if he or she doesn't see you do it. Why? It is likely that your child doesn't understand why he or she feels sadness and cries but you don't. Conversely, he or she may be stuffing emotions down—which only makes things worse. Try meeting in the middle. Discuss your sadness in general terms appropriate for his or her age group.

Let your child guide the length of the conversation. Offer a snack, playtime, or walk when you both need a break.

5. Making fun of or dismissing your child's nightmares or thoughts of "bad people." Your child may very well think he or she "sees" all kinds of things throughout his or her grief journey. Why? Children are incredibly creative and sometimes that means imagining very scary things, especially when something negative has happened to him or her. What does help? First, address your child's fear by reassuring that he or she is physically safe. Allow your child to talk about the fear for a few minutes. Then assure your child again of your love, his or her physical safety and offer a favorite blanket or toy. Helpful always is your loving affection via a hug or snuggle.

### **What can we do to help elementary age children grieve well?**

1. We can listen without judgment. Opening up can be hard work for kids -- and grief and death can be new to your child. Try not to make fun of his or her feelings.
2. Remember that even children from the same biological parents grieve differently.
3. Take time to play with your child. Grieving is hard work and they need breaks from it throughout the day. Maybe at times you do, too. The together time will also help you bond.
4. Help your child to say "goodbye" or "see you later," to his or her loved one.
5. Talk about the person who died, even if it's hard for you. Children don't understand why anyone would stop talking about the person.

6. Offer choices for all kinds of situations your child is involved in. Why? Death, loss and grief are events and emotions that your child didn't ask for. Having choices, especially in the early phases of grief, allows your child to exert some control over the uncontrollable.
7. Answer any and all questions your child asks. If you don't know the answer, respond, "I don't know but will get back to you. Will you remind me in case I don't remember to answer you?" Why? Kids have amazing memories, especially when they are seeking to understand one of the most difficult experiences in their very young lives. Honor their innate curiosity and intuitive nature. They deserve age appropriate answers.
8. Tell them: It's OK to laugh, smile, have fun and play—and it is also OK to cry, be sad and feel angry that something happened to them that they didn't ask for and don't understand.
9. Explain to your child that he or she may continue to miss or grieve their loved one throughout their lives. This will also help him or her to understand that though the person died, the love for that person can last forever.
10. Take the long view. What this means is that even though you wish the sadness would end immediately, the grief journey will provide moments when you and your child can build the kind of meaningful memories that only become apparent over time.

\*Always remember, every ounce of love you pour into your grieving child will help him or her to become healthier, more emotionally sound adults who may one day have children of their own. In helping your child grieve well, you're helping generations to come.

# helping children cope with sibling loss

by Dianne Gray

1 Be open and honest about the death of their sibling. Children are wise, intuitive and insightful. They can sense when things don't add up. Be sure to confirm or deny truths as they reveal themselves. You want to build a foundation of trust not a foundation of lies between you, when the rest of life feels upside down.

2 Show and explain the surviving sibling that grief is a part of life and confirm that it's alright to cry and feel sad about the death of their brother or sister.

3 Confirm that these tremendously sad feelings won't last forever... even if it feels that way right now.

4 Remind the surviving sibling that he or she is not alone in their grief and that you are grieving too, even if he or she doesn't see you crying or feeling sad.

5 Bereaved siblings often feel guilty and participate in "magical thinking" (a belief that somehow they contributed to the death of the sibling). Remind the surviving sibling repeatedly that he or she was not at fault in the death of their brother or sister.

**Guilt:** A surviving sibling may feel guilt about being alive when their brother or sister died. This is a natural part of the grief process. The surviving sibling may also feel a sense of relief that the brother or sister died, which also causes feelings of guilt to arise. Allow the surviving sibling the opportunity to speak about these feelings without condemnation or accusation.

Confusion about their role in the family: “Am I still a little sister?” one little girl asked. What should she say to people who ask how many brothers or sisters she has following the death of the sibling? Role play and practice giving answers. Your child is always a brother or sister even though their sibling has died. How to explain this and to whom, is up to you both, even if you don’t agree on the answer.

Give your surviving child space to answer questions as he or she feels comfortable in that

moment, without correcting him or her in front of others. Why? Your surviving sibling child is navigating his or her grief as you are. There are new “norms” and each of you are finding your way. Don’t take offence if your surviving child’s answer is different than one you would give.

Remember, you are both navigating a new normal. With love and focused time together, you will find your way through grief.

## **RESOURCES FOR GRIEVING SIBLINGS**

- The Compassionate Friends: [https://www.compassionatefriends.org/Brochures/when\\_a\\_brother\\_or\\_sister\\_dies.aspx](https://www.compassionatefriends.org/Brochures/when_a_brother_or_sister_dies.aspx)
- The Dougy Center: [http://www.dougy.org/docs/TDC\\_Sibling\\_Grief\\_Tip\\_Sheet\\_10\\_14.pdf](http://www.dougy.org/docs/TDC_Sibling_Grief_Tip_Sheet_10_14.pdf)
- Open To Hope Foundation: <http://www.opentohope.com/death-of-a-sibling/>

- Band Back Together: <http://www.bandbacktogether.com/sibling-loss-resources/>
  - National Child Traumatic Stress Network: [http://nctsn.org/nctsn\\_assets/pdfs/Sibling\\_Loss\\_Final.pdf](http://nctsn.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/Sibling_Loss_Final.pdf)
  - What's Your Grief: <http://www.whatsyourgrief.com/death-of-a-sibling/>
  - I Will Remember You: A Guidebook Through Grief for Teens by Laura Dower
  - Losing Someone You Love: When a Brother or Sister Dies by E. Richter
  - Recovering from the Loss of a Sibling by K. Donnelly
  - Part of Me Died Too: Stories of Creative Survival Among Bereaved Children and Teenagers by Virginia Lynn Fry & Katherine Paterson
  - Sibling Grief: Healing After the Death of a Brother or Sister by P. Gill White
- BOOKS ON SIBLING LOSS**
- Coping With the Death of a Brother or Sister by Ruth Ruiz
  - Empty Room: Surviving the Loss of a Brother or Sister at Any Age by Elizabeth DeVita-Raeburn

# surviving the loss of a sibling

by Dr. Heidi Horsley | PsyD, LCSW, MS

When I was 20 years old, I was awakened in the middle of the night to the terrible news that my 17-year-old brother Scott and cousin Matthew had been killed together in a car accident. It seemed inconceivable that my brother had died. My brother, who I had grown up with, shared a history with, and expected to grow old with, was suddenly gone forever from my life. Scott had unruly blond curls and bright green eyes. He was very athletic, devoured Twix candy bars, was a NY Jets fan and loved to play practical jokes. I envisioned us attending each others' college graduations and weddings, raising our kids together and growing old together.

Scott's death turned my world upside down and put everything

I ever believed into question. We expect a natural order to the losses in our lives with our grandparents dying first, followed by our parents and then eventually our siblings. Our siblings share a childhood history and take this journey with us, as parallel travelers in our lives, wrote Elizabeth Devita-Raeburn in her book, *The Empty Room: Understanding Sibling Loss*. In fact, most siblings will spend 80-100% of their lifespans together (Packman, Horsley, Davies, & Kramer, 2006). However, all of us are not so fortunate, as two million people each year become bereaved siblings (Hogan & Desantis, 1992). Studies show that bereaved siblings grieve for not only their brothers or sisters, but for the loss of future plans together and the opportunity to

grow old with someone who knew them at every developmental life stage (Horsley, 2003; Marshall, 2013). Many consider their sibling to be their best friend. When one dies the other feels the loss intensely. Lyn, whose sister Donna died at age 49 of breast cancer, remembers her sister this way, “Donna was my trusted confidant, my witness and my cheerleader. She was there for me and I for her. A glance into her eyes affirmed my joyous reality: She was both my sister and my best friend.”

As with Lyn’s story, my brother and I were also very close, and early on in my grief the pain was so great that not only did I not know how I would survive, I didn’t know if I wanted to. I honestly thought I would die of a broken heart. Many other siblings’ have felt the same way after the death of a brother or sister. In interviewing Lauren and Kerri Kiefer after the death of their brother (firefighter Michael Kiefer

who died in the 9/11 tragedy), they described sibling grief this way: “It’s like you’re in a foreign country now and you were just dropped there. You have to learn to adapt to this new world and this new way of life and it’s not easy.”

Sibling loss changes us in countless ways, There are numerous stories of siblings, including myself, who have changed their career trajectories as a result of their sibling’s death. After my brother’s death, I changed my major to psychology, wrote my doctoral dissertation on the sudden death of a sibling and have devoted my career to helping others find hope after loss. Another person whose career was greatly influenced by sibling loss is social worker Andrew Tartler, whose sister died of a brain tumor when he was just 5 years old. As a result of her death, Andrew became an administrator of the Children’s Inn, a National Institutes of Health

residence for families with a child who has cancer. He also founded Camp Fantastic, a summer camp for well siblings who have a brother or sister with cancer.

Meanwhile, Dr. Robert Gallo, who was just 13 when his 6-year-old sister Judy was diagnosed with leukemia, became the chief of the laboratory of tumor cell biology at the National Institutes of Health. One of his most significant discoveries to date has been isolating a retrovirus that causes leukemia, the very disease that killed his sister.

As difficult as sibling loss is, I am here today to tell you, that I did survive and eventually thrive. I have interviewed and worked with thousands of bereaved siblings who have gone on to thrive as well-- and you can, too. Here are some tips and tools you can use to find hope again:

### **Active Coping**

A sibling death often leaves

surviving siblings feeling disempowered and victimized. Participation in memorial events, family gatherings and other activities meaningfully associated with the deceased sibling can be opportunities to focus, express emotions and feel empowered. Elizabeth DeVita-Raeburn found during interviews for her book, that as siblings move toward an active style of coping with grief, they begin to heal. For example, Dr. Stephen Chanock, a pediatric oncologist at the National Institute of Health, devotes his life to trying to find a cure for cancer. Ironically (or not) Dr. Chanock has an office just 500 feet away from the intensive care unit where his brother died. Other examples of active coping may include seizing opportunities to talk about your deceased sibling. What are other examples of active coping? You may choose to volunteer in honor of deceased sibling, make a memorial toast during a holiday party, or plant a memory garden.

Finding any creative way to actively cope by honoring and memorializing your sibling can help you heal. After her sister Linda died of a rare form of childhood cancer, Pleasant Gill White founded a nonprofit organization, The Sibling Connection, whose mission is to provide resources for bereaved siblings. As Gill White points out, “They used to tell us that you had to let go of the person who died and now we understand that it’s all about going on with your life, remembering and staying connected to the person. If you don’t, you’re going to be blocking a part of your life and that can rob you of needed energy.”

### **Explore Internet Sites**

The internet can be a valuable resource and virtual online community 24/7 for individuals dealing with sibling loss. In on-line virtual communities, grieving siblings’ can come together as

a community and grieve online anytime, so they feel less alone. Social networking sites such as The Compassionate Friends Sounds of the Siblings, Facebook page, offers a place where bereaved siblings’ can express condolences, find grief support and get advice from others. Facebook also hosts thousands of memorial pages, where friends and family can post pictures, videos, and memories about those who have died, and provides a place where bereaved siblings can gain support from others.

I co-founded The Open to Hope Foundation, [www.opentohope.com](http://www.opentohope.com) to help support people after loss. Today, Open to Hope is one of the most visited grief support sites on the internet. Open to Hope provides thousands of articles, hundreds of radio shows, cable T.V. shows, webinars, and youtube videos devoted to finding hope after loss. Much of the content on Open to Hope is

specific to sibling loss. Chantal, wrote to Open to Hope saying: “I lost my sister six months ago today. I’m 25 and none of my friends know what I’m going through because their siblings are still alive. But it’s a relief to know others are out there who have survived and understand my pain.”

### **Attend Support Groups**

Bereaved siblings often benefit from talking with others who have experienced a similar loss. This can help them feel less alone in their grief, and show them how others have coped. Currently in the United States, there are more than 300 grief centers and over 150 peer support programs. The largest peer support program for bereaved families is The Compassionate Friends, [www.compassionatefriends.org](http://www.compassionatefriends.org) with over 700 chapters Internationally. This organization offers ongoing programs and peer support groups that can be an opportunity to connect and receive support

from other bereaved siblings.

### **Foster Expressions of Continuing Bonds**

When a sibling dies, we lose the relationship we once had, but we don’t sever our connections with our siblings. We continue those bonds in new and different ways. Bereaved siblings often report praying to their deceased brother or sister or having imaginary conversations with them. They continue to think about their sibling, particularly during anniversary dates, such as graduations, weddings, birthdays, holidays and other milestones. These events can be used as a way to honor the life of their sibling.

In fact, research has shown that maintaining a connection with our deceased loved ones is not only adaptive, it is an integral part of healthy adjustment (Packman et al., 2006). Sarah, 21, whose brother Bruce died last year after

a long battle with cancer, had his favorite NY Jets sweatshirt made into a teddy bear that she sleeps with at night. Others carry their brother or sister's picture with them, wear their clothes, or listen to music that reminds them of their sibling.

Devita-Raeburn found that as bereaved siblings grow older, their wish to stay connected with their deceased sibling grows even stronger. For example, Meredith's brother Jon loved running marathons. After he died of neuroblastoma cancer, she began running marathons and donating the money she raises to cancer research. Running has given Meredith a way to keep Jon with her as she moves into the terrain of her own future, one that she looks to more willingly now. She has invented a new relationship with her brother, one that acknowledges that he is both gone from her life and present too. Running has helped Meredith to redefine life after loss.

### **In Conclusion: Positive Growth**

Although the death of a sibling is a difficult life event, research has shown that bereaved siblings also experience positive growth. In one study, siblings' from 40 families who had lost a brother or sister to cancer were interviewed. These bereaved siblings' reported increased maturity, greater compassion, and more motivation as a result of the sibling death compared to normative samples (Foster, et al., 2012). Forward & Garlie (2003) discovered that positive changes reported by bereaved adolescents included (a) less risk taking, (b) more displays of affection, (c) a deeper appreciation of life, (d) more maturity, (e) a greater life purpose. Bereaved adult siblings also had greater empathy and were more likely to support others who had experienced a death (Davies, 1991).

Bereaved siblings may not always look like they're grieving, but the wounds within them run deep.

Nevertheless, many bereaved siblings eventually learn how to find a new normal and create a new relationship with their deceased siblings. They don't forget, move on and have closure, but rather they honor, remember, and incorporate deceased siblings into their lives in new ways and continue bonds.

With time and support, you will go on to transform your life and create a new normal. I have found meaning, hope, and joy again, and met many wonderful and caring people through organizations such as The Compassionate Friends ([www.compassionatefriends.org](http://www.compassionatefriends.org)), the Elisabeth Kubler-Ross Foundation ([www.ekrfoundation.org](http://www.ekrfoundation.org)) and the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors ([www.taps.org](http://www.taps.org)). Today I keep my brother's memory alive through the stories I share with others. Our siblings continue to live forever in our hearts. They are our guiding lights and will always play an important role in our lives. If you've lost

hope, please lean on mine, until you find your own.

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# children and traumatic loss

by Dianne Gray

Unexpected death that is the result of a violent act or an accident can cause differences in the grief journey in children. This type of loss is often called “traumatic loss.”

A child’s reaction to traumatic loss may be different than that felt in children who were prepared in some way to lose a loved one (for example, through long term illness). Here are a few of the signs of what to look for in children coping with traumatic loss versus other losses the child was prepared for:

## **In traumatic loss the child may:**

Try to avoid thinking about the

person he or she loved because repeated unhappy, traumatic, frightening images may present themselves (often having to do with the way the person died);

Have nightmares and new sleep patterns including interrupted sleep;

Pick fights or create drama with friends or neighbors as a way to release anger or assert control over the uncontrollable situation of losing a loved one suddenly;

Ignore your household pet, thinking he too may “disappear” or die suddenly. Conversely, your child may bond even more closely to your pet, as animals often

provide unconditional love and support that most humans cannot;

Revert to a phase of childhood you thought you were well past. For example, your potty-trained child may suddenly go back into diapers or may wet his or her bed. Your child may also revert to “baby talk” at times. Though this may surprise or anger you, try to be understanding; This is typically temporary and will reverse itself over time;

Complain of headaches, nausea, or other physical maladies;

Have problems concentrating or thinking clearly;

Feel guilty or may feel an association with the death for no apparent reason;

He or she may have repeated thoughts of “if only”... If only I had been better; If only I had asked my mother/father/brother to stay home, the accident wouldn't have happened;

Seem angry and volatile at times without understanding why;

Look around every corner, in every passing car, in every restaurant for the loved one that has died;

Not want to go to places that remind him or her of the deceased.

### **What You Can Do To Help A Child Who Has Experienced Traumatic Loss**

Be aware that if you raise your voice, the child may react unexpectedly and disproportionately stressed; Therefore, speak gently and kindly.

Expect that the child may ask repeatedly about the validity of the person's death; Be patient with your child; Respond consistently that “yes,” the person died and cannot come back, that there was no “mistake” made; “That he or she really is dead.”

However, also validate that the love for that person can and will always last.

Keep your daily routine with your child. This is especially important for children dealing with traumatic loss.

Feed your child healthy, nutritious meals. It may take a bit of extra work on your part but it is well worth it.

Try to understand if the child doesn't wish to talk about the person who died. Sudden loss is hard for children to process. Most, though not all, will talk when they are ready. If it seems to take an uncomfortable amount of time or if you are concerned, try bringing up the topic in small bits.

Keep pictures of the person that died around the house if they are already there. If they are not, ask the child if he or she would like a picture of the person in the house

and let him or her choose the placement of the photo. Don't be surprised if your child moves the picture throughout the house, by the way. It is completely natural for your child to move the photo in response to his or her own feelings that day!

If you're in doubt as to whether your child is handling his or her traumatic loss in a healthy way, please reach out sooner rather than later to a grief professional, your school's guidance counselor, your pediatrician, or your child's teacher or clergy.

Waiting is not helpful when it comes to children and grief. As well, we all need a framework of support in coping with grief. You may be surprised to find out that you are doing everything "right" and this will just take time. Just in case though, please help your child and check with a professional.

**Two great resources for helping your child cope with traumatic loss:**

- Scholastic.com: [http://teacher.scholastic.com/professional/bruceperry/child\\_loss.htm](http://teacher.scholastic.com/professional/bruceperry/child_loss.htm)
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network: <http://www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/traumatic-grief/parents-caregivers>

# books for grieving children & their families

Sometimes, books and stories are the best way to start a conversation with children about their feelings of grief. Here is a list of some of our favorites, along with a link for information and availability on [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

**The Invisible String** by Patrice Karst; (ages 3+ yrs) <http://www.amazon.com/Invisible-String-Patrice-Karst/dp/0875167349>

**Miss You First** by Pat Thomas (ages 4+ yrs) <http://www.amazon.com/Miss-You-First-Death-Books/dp/0764117645>

**What About Heaven** by Kathleen Bostrom; (ages 4+ yrs) <http://www.amazon.com/What-about-Heaven-Little-Blessings/dp/1414375107>

**Tear Soup: A Recipe for Healing After Loss** by Pat Schwiebert and Chuck DeKlyen; (ages 4-8 yrs) <http://www.amazon.com/Tear-Soup-Recipe-Healing-After/dp/0961519762>

**What's Heaven** by Maria Shriver; (ages 4-8 yrs) <http://www.amazon.com/Whats-Heaven-Maria-Shriver/dp/0312382413>

**When Someone Very Special Dies: Children Can Learn To Cope with Grief** by Marge Heegaard; (ages 5-10 yrs); Workbook <http://www.amazon.com/When-Someone-Very-Special-Dies/dp/0962050202>

**Everett Anderson's Goodbye** by Lucille Scott; (ages 5-8 yrs) <http://www.amazon.com/Everett-Andersons-Goodbye-Lucille-Clifton/dp/0805008004>

**Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children** by Bryan Mellonie; (ages 5-8 yrs); <http://www.amazon.com/Lifetimes-Beautiful-Explain-Death-Children-ebook/dp/B002SVQD6Y>

**When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide To Understanding Death** by Laurie Krasny Brown; (ages 6-9 yrs) <http://www.amazon.com/When-Dinosaurs-Die-Understanding-Families/dp/0316119555>

**When Something Terrible Happens: Children Can Learn to Cope with Grief** by Marge

Heegaard; (ages 6-10 yrs)  
Workbook that helps w/trauma  
<http://www.amazon.com/When-Something-Terrible-Happens-Children/dp/0962050237>

**The Empty Place: A Child's Guide Through Grief** by Roberta Temes, PhD; (ages 6-10 yrs) <http://www.amazon.com/The-Empty-Place-Childs-Through/dp/0882821180>

**Sad Isn't Bad: A Good Grief Guidebook for Kids Dealing with Loss** by Michaelene Mundy; (ages 8-12 yrs) <http://www.amazon.com/Sad-Isnt-Bad-Good-Grief-Guidebook/dp/0870293214>

**The Next Place** by Warren Hanson; (age 9 yrs and up) <http://www.amazon.com/Next-Place-Warren-Hanson/dp/0931674328>

**Teen Grief Relief** by Gloria Horsley, PhD and Heidi Horsley, PhD (ages 12+ yrs) <http://www.amazon.com/Teen-Grief-Relief-Gloria-Horsley/dp/1568251106>

**Heal Your Grieving Heart For Teens** by Alan Wolfelt; (12+ years)  
<http://www.amazon.com/Healing-Your-Grieving-Heart-Teens/dp/1879651238>

## **BOOKS TO HELP WITH PET LOSS**

**I'll Always Love You** by Hans Wilhelm; (ages 3-7 yrs)  
<http://www.amazon.com/III-Always-Love-Hans-Wilhelm/dp/0517572656>

**Dog Heaven** by Cynthia Rylant; (ages 4+ yrs) <http://www.amazon.com/Dog-Heaven-Cynthia-Rylant/dp/0590417010>

**Sammy in the Sky** by Barbara Walsh; (ages 3+ yrs) <http://www.amazon.com/Sammy-Sky-Barbara-Walsh/dp/0763649279>

**Saying Goodbye to Lulu** by Corinne Demas; (ages 3-6 yrs)  
<http://www.amazon.com/Saying-Goodbye-Lulu-Corinne-Demas/dp/031604749X>

## **BOOKS TO HELP WITH THE LOSS OF A PARENT OR GRANDPARENT**

**Samantha Jane's Missing Smile: A Story About Coping With the Loss of a Parent** by Julie Pankow and Donna Pincus; (ages 5+ yrs)  
<http://www.amazon.com/III-Always-Love-Hans-Wilhelm/dp/0517572656>

**Missing Mommy: A Book About Bereavement** by Rebecca Cobb; (ages 4-6 yrs) <http://www.amazon.com/Missing-Mommy-Book-About-Bereavement/dp/0805095071>

**What Happened When Grandma Died** by Peggy Barker; (ages 4+ yrs) <http://www.amazon.com/What-Happened-When-Grandma-Died/dp/0570040906>

**Finding Grandpa Everywhere: A Young Child Discovers Memories of a Grandparent** by John Hodge; (ages 7+) Includes teacher & parent guide <http://www.amazon.com/Finding-Grandpa-Everywhere-Discovers-Grandparent/dp/1561231258>

**When Your Grandparent Dies: A Child's Guide to Good Grief**  
by Victoria Ryan (ages 5+ yrs)  
<http://www.amazon.com/When-Your-Grandparent-Dies-Elf-Help/dp/0870293648>

**Saying Goodbye to Daddy**  
by Judith Vigna; (ages 4+ yrs);  
About accidental death <http://www.amazon.com/Saying-Goodbye-Daddy-Judith-Vigna/dp/0807572535>

**Her Mother's Face** by Roddy Doyle; Loss of a mother (ages 4-8 yrs) <http://www.amazon.com/Her-Mothers-Face-Roddy-Doyle/dp/B005M4UDU6>

## **BOOKS TO HELP WITH SIBLING LOSS**

**Where's Jess: For Children Who Have a Brother or Sister Die**  
by Marvin Johnson; (ages 3-6)  
<http://www.amazon.com/Wheres-Jess-Children-Brother-Sister/dp/156123009X>

**Stacy Had a Little Sister** by Wendy Old; (ages 4+) About Sudden Infant Death; <http://www.amazon.com/Stacy-Little-Sister-Concept-Book/dp/0807575984>

**Lost and Found: Remembering a Sister** by Ellen Yeomans; (age 6+ yrs) <http://www.amazon.com/Lost-Found-Remembering-Ellen-Yeomans/dp/1561231290>

**Can You Hear Me Smiling: A Child Grieves a Sister** by Aariane Jackson; (ages 8+) <http://www.amazon.com/Can-You-Hear-Me-Smiling/dp/0878688358>

**My Baby Big Sister: A book for Children Born Subsequent to a Pregnancy Loss** by Cathy Blanford; (ages 4-8 yrs) <http://www.amazon.com/Baby-Big-Sister-Subsequent-Pregnancy/dp/1451579764>

## **BOOKS TO HELP WITH THE DEATH OF A FRIEND**

**I Had a Friend Named Peter: Talking to Children About the Death of a Friend** by Janice Cohn; (ages 6+ yrs) <http://www.amazon.com/Had-Friend-Named-Peter-Children/dp/0688066852>

**When A Friend Dies: A Book For Teens About Grieving and Healing** by Marilyn Gootman; (ages 11+ yrs) <http://www.amazon.com/When-Friend-Dies-Grieving-Healing/dp/1575421704>

# about the author

Dianne Gray is an award winning writer/journalist for over 70 books, magazines, newspapers, blogs and educational projects. She's also a film producer/consultant, international keynote speaker and program builder. In short she's a powerhouse advocate global advocate for improved care for seriously ill, dying and grieving people of all ages. Her motivational keynote talks and inspirational delivery discuss the tough and tender topics involved in the provision of quality end of life and grief care.

Dianne is also President of the Elisabeth Kubler-Ross Foundation, on the board of the International Children's Palliative Care Network and is co-founder of the American Academy of Pediatrics, Section of Hospice and Palliative Medicine's Parent Advisory Group. Over the past twenty years, she has founded four non-profit organizations, each focused on improving life for seriously ill children and their families.

As well, she still sits bedside with as many patients as possible, often acting as a resource for families facing end of life care for their loved ones.

Throughout, Dianne sees her family's ten-year pediatric hospice/palliative care experience with healthy daughter, Christina and her son, Austin (who died in 2005 as a result of a neurodegenerative disorder) as the gift of a lifetime.

As an aside, she has traveled to 17 countries and over 175 cities in the past nine years-- and loves to see who she crosses paths with each and every day!

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