

FAMILY BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT PROGRAMME

Social Work Department

NEWSLETTER NOVEMBER 2021



The Royal
Children's
Hospital
Melbourne

Welcome to the November bereavement group newsletter.

We hope this newsletter brings you a sense of connection with other bereaved parents.

‘The impact of grief on relationships with children and young people in your life’

November’s bereavement group focused on how grief impacts on the relationships bereaved parents have with the other children in their lives, be it surviving siblings, siblings who are born subsequently, children in the extended family or the children of friends and peers. Nine parents attended the group and shared their thoughts and experiences with one another. It was a quietly reflective session which considered both the joys and challenges of being around the other children in your life when one child is no longer here.

As is customary we began the group with introductions of the parents attending and of their child’s story. Some parents attending on the night were newly bereaved, others had children who had died many



years ago. One mother who was attending the group for the first time after her child died in a road accident several years ago, shared that this was the first time she had felt able to come along as it had felt too much to commit to this kind of group until now. She began discussion of the topic for us in her introduction, talking about how the death of her daughter had impacted both on the older daughter (in her late teens) and the younger, 5 year old daughter who, though never having met the middle sister, still asks “How many Christmases did she have”? This introduced the theme of sibling grief, and specifically how “siblings born after the death of the child can suffer grief equally as much as those who were present at the time”. The level of connection that a child can have with a sibling they have never met,

was unexpected for this mother and for many.

Another mother talked about how this resonated with her experience, speaking about her second boy born after his brother's death: "I think he will be grieving a brother he'll never have". She described the strangeness of this:



"They know them but they don't-it's bizarre".

One parent who has also had a child after her firstborn's death, spoke of the impact of grief on how you *look after* subsequent children. After the death of one child, it is very hard to "let them actually be kids, not wrap them in cotton wool" as you are so fearful that they might get hurt and particularly that you may need to bring them into hospital. In the face of these ongoing fears she said nevertheless "you have to step back and let them do what they want to do". Other parents picked up on this theme of protection and wrapping siblings in cotton wool. One stated that it "depends on the day" as to how you are able to push through this "wrapping them up" impulse. In a playground situation, your anxiety about safety can range "from 1 to 10" according to how

you are feeling on the day. Another parent spoke about how this anxiety develops an extra layer of intensity when a child needs to come into hospital.

Sometimes a sibling who has died can become symbolic of different preoccupations, thoughts or struggles which the surviving child is grappling with. The

mother who has a daughter in her late teens shared that, over time, she has realised that when this daughter says she misses her sister it can indicate she is struggling with issues other than grief. For her, "I miss (my sister)" can function as both a red flag and a protective mechanism, a way of having difficult feelings recognised. She also remarked that this older sibling is very protective of her parents' feelings and doesn't want to make them sad. Other parents agreed that this is a common experience with surviving children: "they try to be strong for us (parents)".

Sometimes it can be hard for surviving children or new siblings to ask about the child who is no longer here. One mother talked about her child's siblings feeling more able to ask questions and talk in the car where there is not the intensity of having to have eye contact. At times they

apologise if the conversation makes her cry. “I do feel sad depending what they are asking”. We discussed how maybe sadness and tears don’t have to be seen as negative, as they are part of the reality of a bereaved parent’s world.

Some parents in the group identified that in their experience, siblings of children who have died tend to be “deep thinking”, raising and asking questions as they come to “understand death” a lot better than their peers of the same age. It was felt that it is important to respond in an open way to these questions about their siblings and the circumstances of their death: “We don’t close off the conversation because he’s part of our life”, stated one parent. “He (sibling) is starting to understand decisions that we had to make that we now live with”.

Another parent talked about how you can have conversations with your other children which are then not spoken about for months. Then “one random day they ask questions related to what we’d talked about months ago” in this way demonstrating that they are still

thinking about it and processing it.

Some parents had had a different experience in terms of their other children’s response and connection with the sibling who died. One mother felt her son “didn’t really remember (child who died) at all, and hadn’t asked any “deep” questions yet. She is not sure whether it is a good or bad thing but it does make her sad that he doesn’t remember his brother. She stated that not many people had REALLY got to know her son before his death, which also makes her sad. Being from another country and not having extended family or a strong social network here, can be challenging. However she acknowledged that the key people who will really hold her child’s memory will be her and her husband. And in addition, her mother’s group has been very important to her and she still maintains a close contact with them. Despite the sadness of not seeing her son grow up with theirs, this mother was very appreciative of the other mothers’ ongoing care and spoke about how much she values that “they are able to be there



when I need them”.

The group went on to discuss what it is like to continue seeing the other children in your life. The parents of a child who died aged 8 years had mixed feelings about seeing his sister develop friendships with his friends: “It’s nice to continue his legacy, but it’s hard as well as you see his friends’ lives continuing but he is not there”. Nevertheless this cohort of friends holds some of their child’s history. The sister wears her brother’s jumper and at one stage when she had left it at school there was consternation around retrieving it – it was extra precious to their mother because his name tag is still on it.

With other children in extended families there can also be mixed feelings as bereaved parents watch nephews and nieces grow up. One mother spoke of how her son remains part of the extended family since his death years ago: “He’s part of the family; the cousins are sharing him with their kids too”. It is a pleasure to see photos of her son in her sister’s house but she struggles to picture what he would look like now, as “he’s always a baby in my mind”.

Another mother commented that it is just lovely when she hears another child say her son’s name. This echoes a theme often spoken about in previous group sessions; that one of the most important things when you are grieving for your child is to have people remember them and continue to say their name.

Another way in which parents often want to honour their child’s memory is

by counting them as part of their family when asked about how many children they have. This is not always easy though, given the conversations which may follow. One parent raised the dilemma of how to respond and when to open up these conversations. She described how difficult it is working out when to tell people, and how for her it changes according to whether or not she is going to have an ongoing relationship with the person. If it is someone she meets, for instance, in the supermarket, she will just say she has two children, but if it is someone with whom she will continue to be involved, such as parents at her children’s school, she is more likely to tell them about her other child.

It is hard to juggle the plethora of emotions attached to a family’s grief, for parents but for surviving siblings as well. Sometimes it is a challenge knowing how to navigate sibling responses. One mother stated her second son, born after the first died, asked her “why are there so many pictures of [child who died] but not me?” She replied that “I can see you everyday, but I can’t see your brother anymore”.

Some parents spoke of the healing power of other children. Many spoke of the joy of seeing siblings interact and even tussle or fight with one another. One mother spoke of funny memories of her two children’s sibling rivalry and how she misses those kind of interactions now. Others spoke about how, when watching surviving siblings interact, they think about how their other child would have been with them: “He

would have been amazing with those two – such a good big brother”. A couple of parents spoke of the strangeness that without the death of their other child, the next one would not have existed. “The baby is a connection to [child who died], because he is here because of him, in an ironic way”. One parent spoke about trying to be grateful for her other children and what she does have.

This was a thoughtful and reflective session where parents shared how

joyous and sad feelings can co-exist when you are a grieving parent engaged in relationships with other children. In the discussion they shared on this evening they evoked how witnessing surviving and new children interact with each other as they continue their path in the world, can both heighten loss but also bring rich memories and thoughts of your other child. These ongoing relationships with children in many ways can be sustaining, but can bring both beauty and longing to grieving parents.



Symbols that remind you of your child

For the final group of the year we will focus on the symbols that reminds you of your child.

Members of the group can make their symbol in bakeable clay/polymer and then keep it as a keepsake and symbol of your child's presence with you and your family and parents will have the opportunity to tell the group about their child and the significance of the symbol for them.

As we cannot meet face to face you will need to source your own clay. You can find it in most craft stores including Spotlight, Lincraft, K Mart and office works. There are different brands including Sculpey, Polymer clay and FIMO. You can also make your own: https://www.ehow.com/how_8536912_make-bakeable-clay.html#:~:text=%20How%20to%20Make%20Your%20Own%20Bakeable%20Clay,figurine%20of%20a%20person%20or%20a...%20More%20 If you do not wish to create a model you can certainly be part of the group and participate in the discussion.

The end of the year, religious and cultural celebrations and the arrival of a new year can present unique challenges for bereaved parents. In this group we will explore how to keep your child present in these times.

Our December group is always a week earlier than usual and is on the **9th December**.

If you wish to attend this group please

email: **Bereavement.Services@rch.org.au** by **Monday 6th December**

Our letter box is Waiting!



Contributions such as responses and reflections on the groups' themes, poems, letters, songs, reviews of books that you may have found helpful, quotations from parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters and friends, feedback about this newsletter are most welcome. Share your thoughts, experiences, questions with others who are bereaved. Please forward them to:

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PARKVILLE VIC 3052
Phone: 03 9345 6111
Or email: Bereavement.Services@rch.org.au

The next meeting of the
Family Bereavement Support Evening Group (Via Zoom)

Thursday 9th November 2021 at 7.30pm

Please join us to discuss the topic:

'Symbols that remind you of your child'

If you wish to attend this group please

email: Bereavement.Services@rch.org.au



The newsletter is always a team effort.
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Social Work Department, RCH



