

**Dr. Lori Rappaport**  
12625 High Bluff Drive #201 \* San Diego, CA 92130  
Phone (858) 481-2188 Fax (858) 400-5204  
[www.lorirappaportphd.com](http://www.lorirappaportphd.com)

## *Helping a surviving child in the early days of grief*

Following the loss of a child, parents are overwhelmed with their own grief. They are burdened by their own reactions, those of others, and the multitude of arrangements that need to be made. As if this wasn't enough, they are still expected to care for their surviving children. Not just *care* for them, but carefully attend to their needs, for they too have suffered a tragic loss. Unfortunately, most bereaved parents find the effort it takes to listen and communicate with their children openly about their loss and grief more than they can bear. Simply put: they don't have the energy to pay attention to their child's needs. They are doing the best they can, but are themselves consumed with their own pain and grief. Given this, they may not understand the changes in their surviving children, or realize the importance of sharing their own reactions with them and of being patient with them. During this difficult time, parents need support and guidance in tending to the needs of their surviving children. Listed here are a few key things to help parents in the early stages of grief.

- ◆ *Don't protect your child from the family's mourning.* Parents naturally want to protect their children from sorrow. However, such protection often adds to siblings' confusion, loneliness and sense of isolation even among the crowds of people. The loss of a sibling causes a shift in roles in the family; as siblings not only lose each other but also their "place" in the family as well. The *middle* child may now become the *oldest*; the *baby* an *only* child. Parents need to be aware of these perceived changes in their surviving children and how this impacts their sense of who they are, and their responsibility to the family. It is more important than ever that surviving siblings feel connected to the family unit, as they are well aware of how fragile it is.
- ◆ *Maintain as much routine in your child's life as possible, and make few major changes.* Obviously, while submerged in the land of grief, you can't control everything. Circumstances force us to make changes we would rather not make. However, many of us are lucky enough to have support from those around us, constantly asking "What can I do? How can I help?" Enlist the assistance of other adults who are familiar to the grieving children. A favorite aunt, uncle, family friend, or teacher can be asked to spend time with, and provide individual attention to the child. Don't feel guilty about asking them to make lunches, drive to school, pick up from activities, take them to the movies, out to dinner or for a playdate or overnight.

- ◆ *Inform your child's school and teacher.* Teachers can be an incredible resource and support for your child. They can help to strengthen your child's support system by working with their peers. They can also provide you with feedback as to how your child is coping away from home.
- ◆ *Communicate.* Explain to your child what is going to change because of the death and equally important, what's *not* going to change. Children's fantasies are often far worse than reality. Often following a death, children fear a move, as parents verbalize difficulty continuing to live in their house. Just knowing they will not be forced to change schools or leave their neighborhood can reassure a child. On the other hand, don't overpromise.
- ◆ *Recognize your own limits.* Don't attempt more than you can handle—if you feel overwhelmed, your child will feel overwhelmed too. If asking for or allowing others to help is difficult for you, recognize that your ability to do so is in your child's best interests. Take care of yourself; you could not model a more important skill for your child.
- ◆ *Maintain the same rules of discipline and the same expectations for your child.* It is very tempting to lower expectations for grieving children, and sometimes, especially in the beginning, that makes sense. But as weeks turn into months, children need to return to some sense of normalcy, and that means lovingly applying the same expectations as before. Caring discipline makes children feel safe.
- ◆ *Make sure your child knows where you are and how to reach you.* Instruct teachers, coaches, baby-sitters and others to let your child call you at any time. They may feel they are helping out by giving you peace, but often this creates unnecessary anxiety for your child. They need to know you are OK, to check in or some reassurance.
- ◆ *Be present.* Nothing is more reassuring to your grieving child than your sheer presence. Express your love in words and in hugs and kisses. On a regular basis, spend time listening to whatever your child has to tell you. It may not always be related to the death. If you don't listen to your child talk about the small things, then they may never talk to you about the big ones.
- ◆ *Remember grief is a process.* The impact of losing a sibling lasts for a lifetime. While you may not be able to say, share or do for your child right now, you will have many opportunities to do so in the future.