Bereaving Families' Stress Response and Management After the Death of a Child

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No matter who experiences it, grieving and learning to cope after a death is never an easy process. When it comes to a child's death, the event can feel more impactful and harder to understand, especially for the family of the child. According to the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (2023), 3,816 children between the ages of one and four and 5,975 children between the ages of five and 14 died in 2021. No matter how the child died, their family is left with a difficult and harsh grief process that not many people will understand. It changes how they interact with the world and with others as they deal with their own personal stressors and their family's restructuring. Although the stress responses are different between bereaved parents and their living children, family systems must learn how to refunction and cope during the grief process.

Parent Stress Responses to Child's Death

The death of a child is a grueling and winding process that comes with unique challenges and struggles for parents. As worded by Dias et al. (2017), "parental grief is complex, intense, highly individualized, and long lasting" (p. 318). The process of grief is complicated because there's no linear path or right way to do it (Dias et al., 2017). One major stressor of losing a child is the identity crisis that can follow. Parents can question their position as a parent and be uncertain about their role within the family (Dias et al., 2017). This is more common in families whose only child died. Their identity crisis forms from the question of if they can still be considered parents when they do not have any living children (Dias et al., 2017). In families with multiple children, there is instead the question of including the deceased child in their total count of children (Dias et al., 2017). Not only is it straining mentally, but physically as well. Overall, bereaved parents who lost children "have higher morbidity and mortality rates compared to those

who lose a parent or spouse" (Dias et al., 2017, p. 319). This can be influenced by health risk factors, including changes in eating habits, sleep disturbances, and engagement in addictive behaviors that are more likely to occur after a parent loses their child (Dias et al., 2017). The stress of bereavement is so impactful that it causes physical strain on the body. It is important for parents to learn coping skills to proactively adapt to bereavement in the long term (Aho et al., 2018). Coping skills allow for parents to learn how to manage the prolonged stressors after the death of a child and even lower the physical impact of grief.

Sibling Stress Responses to Sibling's Death

The death of a sibling is a devastating and complex situation for any child to go through: "5-8% of children will experience the death of a sibling prior to adulthood" (D'Alton et al., 2022, p. 82). With this statistic comes a population of bereaved children who are affected as they continue to age. They experience growth as they get older and process their grief (D'Alton et al., 2022). This growth is dependent on the age and developmental stage of the surviving sibling (D'Alton et al., 2022). Preschoolers may grow out of the confusion and frustration over the absence of their siblings as their cognitive abilities expand and they understand grief. (D'Alton et al., 2022). Adolescents can create a newfound purpose in life after originally showing maladaptive coping mechanisms (D'Alton et al., 2022). Children who experienced the death of a sibling grow in empathy, compassion, and maturity as they start to understand grief and its impact (Jonas-Simpson et al., 2015). They grow in resiliency and understanding as they "faced situations that required courage, emotional risk, and uncertainty" (Jonas-Simpson et al., 2015, p. 246) as they processed their grief. As these living siblings process and understand grief, it is also important to recognize how they are affected by the grief of a parent.

Through children's observations, they are able to pick up on how people process grief. Children can come to understand and examine their parents' grief after the death of a sibling (Jonas-Simpson et al., 2015). Mostly, they are impacted by the grief that their mother expresses (D'Alton et al., 2022). Through observing the grief of their parents, the sibling can experience emotional vulnerability and positive coping mechanisms that can come from expressing and discussing the death of their sibling (Jonas-Simpson et al., 2015). Social situations can also affect how the sibling expresses grief. Younger children can pick up on social norms involving when it is okay to discuss death and bereavement with others (Jonas-Simpson et al., 2015). This causes them to confide more in friends, teachers, or others who are empathetic to their grief and steer away from those who criticize or judge (Jonas-Simpson et al., 2015). This is a more complex situation for children who were born after their sibling died or if their sibling was not alive for long. Some people around them may consider the death of their sibling an ambiguous loss or not real because of the lack of physical relation (Jonas-Simpson et al., 2015). To defer from the development of ambiguous loss, parents are encouraged to help their children build connections with their lost sibling, even after their passing (Jonas-Simpson et al., 2015). Development plays a big role in the stress management of a child after the loss of their sibling, whether it be how they react to grief, how they grow, or how they change their socialization with others.

Changes in Family Systems

The death of a child impacts the function of the family and how they interact as a group, as explained by the family systems theory. The family systems theory "focuses on the response of the family to an intense crisis situation that impacts core structure and belief systems" (Price, 2007, p. 92). In the case of the death of a child within a family, the family goes into an intense crisis because a member of the family has passed away, therefore disrupting the flow of the

family both constructively and mentally. D'Alton et al. (2022) explains that "sibling death disrupts family structure and alters parental functioning by causing distress, which impacts surviving children's attempts to cope" (p. 96). As the parents lower in mental functioning due to the strain of bereavement, the rest of the family system is affected by the overall grief and the lack of reliable support at the time (D'Alton et al., 2022). The most important step in diminishing strain on the family system is returning to a routine. Activities can cause additional challenges for families because of the emotional impact of the death (Dias et al., 2017). These activities are either described as technical, something that has an identifiable solution, or adaptive, something that is complex to identify and requires active work from the individual (Dias et al., 2017). One example of a technical challenge is a parent not being able to fall asleep, which can be solved by a healthcare provider through medication (Dias et al., 2017). On the other hand an adaptive activity, such as intrusive thoughts about the child's death, is more difficult because it disrupts daily living and does not have an easy fix (Dias et al., 2017). Adaptive activities are harder to complete during a parent or siblings' bereavement because of the mental strain they experience (Dias et al., 2017). It is emphasized to families that they regain the ability to return to usual activities early on in the grief process (Price, 2007). This helps the family identify how to develop coping skills within their daily activities as they progress further into doing more complicated tasks. As the family learns to restructure their daily lives, there are shifts within family relations as well. Overall, there is a longer process of creating new roles and relationships within the family system (Price, 2007). The death of a child has "an adverse effect on the parents' relationship with each other, family functioning, and the lives of other children in the family" (Aho et al., 2018, p. 326). Parents are likely to experience stages of grief on different timelines, thereby affecting their relationship with each other (Dias et al., 2017). It is important for parents

to support each other through their own journey of grief to help maintain their relationship (Dias et al., 2017). As the family processes grief, it can also bring them together and make the family system stronger (Jonas-Simpson et al., 2015). As the family rebuilds relationships with one another and strengthens their family system, they begin to gain familial stress management skills and coping techniques.

<div align="center">**Family Bereavement Management**</div>

Families develop ways that they manage their bereavement over time. One of the most beneficial ways is by continuing to honor the child who has passed. Grief traditions allow family members to balance the ability to still remember the dead child over time while still maintaining the ability to continue with life (Dias et al., 2017). Creating memorabilia or having memorial spaces such as a photo wall or garden is one way a family can celebrate the child's life within their home (Dias et al., 2017). For children who lost their sibling, they can maintain connection with them through physical objects or signs that are related to the sibling (Jonas-Simpson et al., 2015). Discussion about the sibling allows for the chance to be open and vulnerable about grief while sharing as well (Jonas-Simpson et al., 2015). Families are also able to develop bereavement management skills through the support of others.

Some of the most impactful ways can be through support groups that consist of other parents who went through a similar situation (Aho et al., 2018). It is stated that "peer support in general has a positive impact on the PTSD symptoms of parents" (Aho et al., 2018, p. 330). It helps parents adapt to bereavement in the long term and learn from other parents and families (Aho et al., 2018). Similarly, parent bereavement programs that are funded by healthcare initiatives can support families in their bereavement process, although they do not last long (Dias et al., 2017). Children who lost a sibling are able to find support within schools from their peers

and teachers (Jonas-Simpson et al., 2015). Art projects involving families are especially beneficial because they allow a child to honor their sibling who has passed and still show them as a member of the family (Willer et al., 2018). Bereavement management allows families to support one another and find support from others as they develop healthy coping skills. They can create a balance between honoring the child who has passed and being able to continually live on with their lives.

Conclusion

In the event of a child's death, families systems are challenged to reconstruct and cope despite the bereavement of the individuals. Parents are likely to face an identity crisis and can possibly experience negative health effects from the stress of grief. The remaining siblings grieve based on their developmental stage, parent's grief, and social support. Their bereavement affects how they recover as a family system and their ability to return to day-to-day activities. They can manage bereavement through remembering the child and social support. Families have the ability to grieve healthily and develop healthy coping skills after the death of their child. It is important that family members support each other in grief as well as find their own ways to healthily cope. Families can recover together and still memorialize their lost child.

Although there is research on how this process occurs within families, it is limited. Specifically, the age of the child who died is typically limited to younger children. Many of the families discussed in research experienced Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), had an early terminal illness diagnosis, or experienced sudden deaths. Research needs to be expanded on families who experience the death of an older child, specifically teenage years. As families are more established in routine and system functioning at that age, coping and recovery of the family system may look different than families who lost younger children. Additionally, there should be

more research into how government and local agencies can support bereaving families for a longer period of time . Agencies only support families for a year at most. Agencies should be able to provide families with accessible resources and the ability to support recovery for longer periods. One resource can include the ability to reach out to other bereaving families, as social support is beneficial for each family, and they can understand some aspects of each other's experiences. Social support is beneficial for families, whether from other groups or from resources to support their grief period. The death of a child is never an easy process, so families need support in order to return to functioning and to learn healthy coping skills to support their grieving process.

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