



The Silent Grievors

Supporting Siblings After Infant Loss
Through Honest Communication and Connection

On Angels' Wings provides ongoing support and grief recovery services for families who lose a child at birth or have a child with a life-limiting diagnosis.



Michelle Cramer, CFRE

**Founder & Executive Director — On Angels' Wings
Advanced Certified Grief Recovery Method Specialist
Founder – The Compassionate Workplace Initiative**



- 18+ years supporting families facing infant and child loss
- Founder of a multi-state nonprofit serving bereaved families
- Author of *Unshattered Grief*
- Developer of OAW's *Legacy of Hope* sibling support program

Why we're here

Siblings of infant loss are often overlooked or misunderstood.



Learning Objectives

1. Identify unique grief responses of siblings
2. Demonstrate developmentally appropriate language when explaining death
3. Recognize overlooked signs of sibling grief
4. Create opportunities for sibling inclusion and connection



THROUGH THEIR EYES: SCENARIO 1

Five-year-old Sarah has asked for a little sister for two years and now mommy has a baby sister in her belly. Sarah helped name her, choosing Bella for sissy's middle name. But mommy went to the hospital for a long time. Grandma brought Sarah there to "say goodbye," and then they all went home without baby sister.



SCENARIO 1 CHAT

What might this child feel?

What questions would they ask?

What might adults overlook?



THROUGH THEIR EYES: SCENARIO 2

8-year-old Luke's little brother, Finn, has a heart condition. Luke has only seen Finn one time - when he was born - because he's been in the hospital for almost a year, and they won't let Luke visit. Kids aren't allowed in the special part of the hospital where Finn is. Mommy and Daddy take turns staying with Finn, which means someone is always missing Luke's softball games and they're never all together.



SCENARIO 2 CHAT

What might this child feel?

What questions would they ask?

What might adults overlook?



THROUGH THEIR EYES: SCENARIO 3

Lily has grown up knowing that she has a big brother that died before she was born. Every year on his birthday they have a cake, and at Christmas, Mommy gets him a present. Though she's never met him, Lily misses her brother. She knows that he will never get to do all the fun things that she does, like going to the zoo or snuggling with Mommy on the couch to watch a movie.



SCENARIO 3 CHAT

What might this child feel?

What questions would they ask?

What might adults overlook?



The Absent Future

"I'm going to be a big sister."

IDENTITY FORMATION
THROUGH ANTICIPATION

Abrupt loss of imagined future



Born Into Grief

"I'll never have a sister."

IDENTITY FORMATION
SHAPED BY ABSENCE

Unspoken narratives
Pressure to be perfect
Comparison dynamics



Myths

"They're too young to understand."

"They will forget."

"They are resilient."



What the Research Says

about cognitive development
in regards to understanding death



3-5 YEARS OLD

- Death is reversible
- Magical thinking = they can come back
- Confusion and fear when euphemisms are used
- Self-blaming



3-5 YEARS OLD

- Death is reversible
- Magical thinking = they can come back
- Confusion and fear when euphemisms are used
- Self-blaming

support strategies:

- use clear, simple language
- repeat explanations with patience
- use "died" instead of euphemisms



6-9 YEARS OLD

- Begin to understand death is permanent
- May not understand that it's universal
- Seek details on how death occurred and what death is
- May personify death
- May develop fear of death or of losing other loved ones



6-9 YEARS OLD

- Begin to understand death is permanent
- May not understand that it's universal
- Seek details on how death occurred and what death is
- May personify death
- May develop fear of death or of losing other loved ones

support strategies:

- honest explanations
- reassurances about safety
- be careful not to make promises



10-12 YEARS OLD

- Begin understanding it's a biological reality
- that it's universal to all living creatures
- it's irreversible
- start internalizing emotions, strong for others
- suppressing needs, personality
- acting out



10-12 YEARS OLD

- Begin understanding it's a biological reality
- that it's universal to all living creatures
- it's irreversible
- start internalizing emotions, strong for others
- suppressing needs, personality
- acting out

support strategies:

- encourage emotional expression (through example)
- provide safe, non-judgmental space for discussion
- don't attempt to "fix" their grief or response



TEENAGERS

- explore the purpose/meaning of death
- may seek the support over peers instead of adults
- suppressed emotions can lead to poor choices
- masking grief by seeking independence



TEENAGERS

- explore the purpose/meaning of death
- may seek the support over peers instead of adults
- suppressed emotions can lead to poor choices
- masking grief by seeking independence

support strategies:

- create a safe space for sharing, but don't push
- set an example, be vulnerable without expectation
- respect their autonomy
- be honest in responding to questions - even if it's "I don't know"





The Power of Words

why language matters
with siblings of infant loss



Common Euphemisms

used to explain infant death to children

"The baby went to sleep."

"We lost the baby." / "The baby is gone."

"God needed another angel."

"Something went wrong."

"The baby didn't make it."

"The baby is resting now."



CHAT RESPONSE

What's another way you could say this to a 5 year old to prevent a misunderstanding of death:

"Your baby brother is sleeping for a long time."



CHAT RESPONSE

What's another way you could say this to a 7 year old born after an infant loss:

"We lost the baby."



CHAT RESPONSE

What could you say to effectively engage a child who lost an infant sibling...

and is clearly suppressing their grief?



USE WORDS THAT ARE CLEAR, SAFE, AND REASSURING

- “The baby died. That means their body stopped working.”
- “They cannot come back.”
- “It’s okay to feel sad, angry, or confused.”
- “You can ask me questions anytime.”
- “I am sad too. Would you like to talk about it?”





Creating Emotional Safety

through engagement & demonstration



CHILDREN WILL MODEL HOW ADULTS ADDRESS GRIEF

- Parent observation
- Societal avoidance
- emotional mirroring



WHEN GRIEF DOESN'T FEEL SAFE, SIBLINGS OF INFANT LOSS WILL:

- hide or minimize their emotions
- learn “it’s not something we talk about”
- suppress questions, which leads to confusion



CAREGIVERS NEED TO CREATE EMOTIONAL SAFETY BY:

- naming their own emotions openly
- allow the sibling to see them grieve
- invite questions
- engage the sibling about their emotions without pressure
- validate and normalize all feelings
- follow the siblings lead





Examples

"What have you been thinking about since the baby died?"

"It's okay to feel sad, mad, confused. There are a lot of things you can be feeling. Do you want to share with me?"

"You can tell me anything you're feeling, at anytime."

"I might not have all the answers, but I'm here to listen."

"Do you want to talk about it now, or another time?"

Including Siblings in the Grief Process



PRACTICAL INCLUSION TOOLS:

- Memory boxes
- Ritual participation
- Anniversary acknowledgment
- Storytelling





Recap



SIGNS OF SIBLING GRIEF:

- Regression
- Anxiety
- Acting out
- Hyper-independence
- Avoidance



WE CANNOT:

- bring their sibling back
- eliminate grief
- have expectations for how it looks



WE CANNOT:

- bring their sibling back
- eliminate grief
- have expectations for how it looks

WE SHOULD:

- Validate
- Use clear language
- Include
- Model emotional safety



Michelle L. Cramer
Founder & Executive Director
hope@oawphoto.org

Thank you!
Q&A

