

Coping With Grief: The Impact of Child Life Services for School Aged Children After the

Death of a Sibling

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Initial Statement

Illness and death significantly impact a family unit, especially when it is the death of a child. Oftentimes, siblings are overlooked when discussing the passing of a child, with most of the attention and support focusing on how to support the grieving parents. However, research shows that around five percent to ten percent of children, experience many mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (Boelen et al., 2021, p. 295). For many children, sibling loss is a confusing, lonely, and frightening time; and school aged children “regrieve” this loss over the span of their development as they mature and cope with the reality of their loss (Brooten et al., 2017).

The negative impact of living siblings after loss is obvious; these children report feelings of loneliness, anger, sadness, guilt, anxiety, and receive less attention from their parents (Rosenburg et al., 2015). During this vulnerable time, child life specialists can be relied on to initiate the grieving and coping process for the entire family. Dealing with illness, grief, and bereavement is a sensitive topic because individuals try to make sense of what is happening and how their feelings are affected, making it a confusing and challenging situation to navigate (Greer, 2017). Child life specialists are to use their background in developmental theory to better the lives of many children and families, while also facilitating coping.

Previous Research

When asked about the role of a child life specialist, most think of their role in procedural support, coping with hospitalization, and explaining new diagnoses (Basak et al., 2019). However, child life specialists are trained in helping families- specifically children, deal with loss. One of the tactics they use is normalization of death, and encouraging discussions about it,

so children can understand they are not alone, and this is something others have experienced (Goodhue, 2024).

Although there have been numerous studies conducted on the impact of the death of a child on their parents, or the family unit, limited research has been examined on how it impacts only the sibling (Akard et al., 2019). Grief in children is different in grief in adults because their understanding of death is related to their developmental stage. Younger, school aged children tend to express their grief, “behaviorally rather than emotionally,” which can make coping more complicated for them (Sveen et al., 2014, p. 658). As children enter school, they progress into Piaget’s concrete operational stage and begin to understand the permanence of death. However, younger children in this stage, may still engage in magical thinking and believe exemplary academic performance or other “good” behaviors can reverse the death of a family member, which is why it is important to have someone equipped with handling loss specifically with children assist in the coping process (Brown & Jimerson, 2017).

Furthermore, research suggests that experiencing the loss of a sibling is quite common, impacting between five to eight percent of children with one or more siblings in the United States alone (Akard et al., 2019). However, there is a lack of research regarding how school aged children specifically cope with sibling loss while working with a child life specialist. However, there is a lack in research explaining the impact sibling loss has on a school-aged child. During this stage of development, children are searching for validation from the adults in their life to assert their independence. If parents are busy dealing with the loss of a child, unfortunately this stage often becomes overlooked. This can lead to feelings of unworthiness and low confidence.

This current study will focus on the gap in research regarding this issue and what can be done to solve it.

Statement of the Problem

Sibling bereavement can be one of the most distressing life events- especially during childhood, but the subject receives little attention in research, especially in the field of child life. Sibling grief is an experience not well documented, making the consequences of it unclear. Grief can negatively impact families and lead to reduced support from parents, leaving siblings to navigate their own emotions regarding loss leading to emotional isolation (D'Alton et al., 2022). Furthermore, along with negative behavioral issues, sibling bereavement has other detrimental outcomes for children and parents, including an increased mortality rate for both (Burns et al., 2020).

Child life programs are an essential part of the healthcare system, and their partnership with families. Child life specialists have found that a fundamental component of positive coping is focusing family relationships as a whole (Romito et al., 2021). The relationship between siblings is one of the most influential and important relationships that is maintained during childhood (Rositila et al., 2019). Yet child life services are often overlooked after a child dies and the family leaves the hospital, leaving school aged children alone to navigate their grief.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the experience of sibling loss in school aged children and explain how child life services are a necessary resource to assist in the coping process to better familial relationships during this distressing time. This study attempts to gain insight into the knowledge families have about child life services after the death of a child, and how hospitals inform them of these resources. The goal is to learn how certified child life specialists help school-aged children cope with this extraordinary loss of a brother or sister; and discuss the positive impact their services have on families. Additionally, this study will explore how sibling loss during school age impacts their social and cognitive development and determine whether children who experience sibling loss without child life services suffer mental health consequences during adolescence and adulthood.

Research Questions

This study will answer the following questions regarding child life grief and bereavement services on children coping with sibling loss:

1. What challenges do school aged children face when experiencing the loss of a sibling?
2. How do child life grief and bereavement services positively impact the child and family unit when experiencing loss?

Significance of Study

Studies have revealed that children who experience sibling loss during childhood are at higher risk of developing symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and anxiety disorders compared to children who do not suffer loss during childhood (Dickens, 2013).

However, child life specialists can apply their knowledge and training in development to assist children in navigating their feelings of loss and anger surrounding grief after experiencing the death of their brother or sister (Basak et al., 2019). Although this is a major stressor during childhood and an indicator for future mental-health issues, research that supports child life intervention during loss is severely lacking, and the entire healthcare would be better equipped to handle these issues if further research were provided.

Literature Review

Every year, over 500,000 children in the United States are diagnosed with life-threatening illnesses (Bazak et al., 2019). Furthermore, more than 40,000 adolescents and children die each year, leaving behind many bereaved siblings (Bolton et al., 2016). During situations of death, end of life, and grief families and individuals attempt to make sense of what is happening to them and why (Greer, 2017). During these difficult times, child life specialists collaborate with an interdisciplinary team to use developmentally appropriate play and language to facilitate coping and normalization of stressful and emotional situations such as the death of a sibling (Romito et al., 2021).

However, discussing death, especially with a child about the loss of another child, is still considered somewhat taboo in our society and culture. Fortunately, child life specialists are equipped to navigate uncomfortable conversations with honesty at a level that is developmentally appropriate for the child to assist in their coping.

Negative Implications for Bereaved School-Aged Siblings

Losing a brother or sister impacts children in every aspect. One study revealed that bereaved school-aged siblings have increased rates of ADHD, anxiety disorders, and any mental disorder (Bolton et al., 2021). School-aged children have been reported to experience a wide

range of emotions from sadness, loneliness, anxiety, depression, intense anger, and fear of death according to parent proxy and child self-report. Additionally, they also struggled with fears or anxiety about their parent's safety and the safety of themselves, placing this age group above the national norm for rates of anxiety and depression (D'Alton, et al., 2022).

Sibling Loss

The death of a family member is devastating at any age. Adults typically are better at handling the loss of a loved-one due to their higher order of thinking and other life experiences. Additionally school-aged children potentially lack parental support to work through their grief because their family members may be too upset to provide adequate comfort after the death of their sibling. Furthermore, peers may also begin to distance themselves from a bereaved child because they lack the understanding of this specific experience (Ferow, 2019). Sibling relationships typically carry into adulthood, and while growing up help develop social skills one needs to excel in other aspects of life. Additionally, studies show that school-aged children possess the cognitive awareness to understand death is permanent (Stuber, 2001).

Developmentally Appropriate Intervention

Bereavement during childhood is considered a significant developmental issue that disrupts academic, career, and relationship functioning (Burns et al., 2020). Many children are provided with books and if they are Christian, bibliotherapy to help them cope with the loss of a sibling. Play is also utilized for children of all ages-- but especially those who cannot read. Play is a way to promote normalcy surrounding death, and some child life specialists even use pinatas to provide an outlet to children who are angry (Greer, 2017).

Processing Grief

Traumatic grief refers to unresolved grief and PTSD. Traumatic grief refers to unresolved grief and PTSD, which is triggered by the suddenness of death, self-blame, and emotional attachment to the deceased. Surviving siblings also may face unique challenges depending on where they are during development. For example, a child in Piaget's preoperational stage of development will have difficulty understanding that death is permanent, and might think their actions will bring someone back, or be the reason their brother or sister died. However, if a child is older and in Piaget's concrete operational stage of development, children can grasp the permanence of death.

Developmental Impact of Sibling Death

Developmental regression in school-aged children is not uncommon to see in children that are grieving the loss of a sibling. Studies have shown they might become clingy, throw tantrums, and cry more (Ferow, 2019). To better understand how they feel, child life specialists may observe or engage in play with the child who is experiencing loss. Furthermore, suicide can be a major concern for this age group, so it is important to talk to them about what they are feeling, to attempt to prevent any feelings of isolation, or risky behaviors, which can cause children to fall behind developmentally.

The Impact of Gender on Grief

Gender is something that should be greatly considered when studying how loss affects children. In fact, girls are more likely to be impacted by boys when it comes to the loss of a sibling as opposed to boys. However, both genders have reported making positive changes within themselves after their siblings had died. These changes included: being nice to others,

becoming more mature and considerate of others, and becoming closer with their families (Brooten et al., 2017).

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