

Frontline

This newsletter is dedicated to professional caregivers. It is our hope that this newsletter will help you give comfort and strength to those you serve.

Spring 2014

Family Estrangement II: Grief and Sibling Rivalry



By Dr. Earl A. Grollman

It was Alfred Adler (1870 – 1937), the eminent Austrian psychiatrist, who posed the belief that the birth order had a profound effect in the creation of puzzling birth rivalries. My dear friend, the late Fred Rogers (of the award-winning television series, Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood), cites the arrival of a baby brother or sister as a huge event in a child's life.

Hostility and resentment surface, especially aimed at the mother whose hours are now spent with the baby. The result could be regression with thumb sucking, bed-wetting or extra-clinging. In his book, Mr. Rogers Talks with Parents, he takes on the older sibling's point of view: "I'm really mad that you brought home another baby – wasn't I good enough? No one loves me anymore."

Rancorous antagonism may continue through childhood, adolescence and years beyond – especially with the death of a parent!

"My baby sister was always the favourite. She was often excused from household chores. Whenever we fought, I was the one who was blamed. When I received a scholarship from a prestigious university, I never received a word of congratulations. It was only about her, never about me."

"My mother died some months ago. The final blow was that she took mom's wedding ring. I never asked

for much, but I asked for that ring. I was entitled. I was the eldest. I never want to see her again!"

Who gets the expensive jewelry or the car? Sibling rivalry is described in the Psychiatric Dictionary as "usual situations where brothers and sisters engage in intense competition one against the other for the love and affection and approval either for one or another of their parents."

Competition between brothers and sisters are poignantly described in the Bible with the conflict of Cain and Abel, resulting in murder; the defrauding by Jacob of the inheritance of Esau; and the sisters Leah and Rachel's aggressive struggles to marry Jacob. Shakespeare has many examples of sibling rivalry in King Lear and The Taming of the Shrew.

But you don't need to reference the Bible or Shakespeare. Think of your own family. Were there not times that you thought that you did not receive equal amounts of endearment as your sibling(s)? In your family, was one child considered the favoured offspring? Be honest! Hurts from childhood are deep and painful and may continue throughout adulthood.

This brings us to another of the seven mortal sins. It is called envy. This grudging desire for advantage breeds bitterness and resentment.





There is no perfect family relationship. We are all burdened, scarred and broken in different places.

Parents may unwittingly be part of the problem. Lesson: Parents – comparisons are odious! Be careful when we laud one child's accomplishment in a way that undermines another child: "Paul, look at Rebecca's report card. Straight As. That's what you should be striving for."

Conflict Resolution

The loss of loved ones can bring the surviving family members closer together. It can also drive them apart. Unresolved quarrels and resentments from childhood often lurk like monsters in the closet, casting shadows on current family tranquility.

Harvard Medical School and other universities have initiated courses on conflict resolution to identify healthy responses to these struggles.

The following thoughts may be beneficial:

- There is no perfect family relationship. We are all burdened, scarred and broken in different places.
- Resentments may begin to melt away when we become aware and sensitive to the needs of others. We need to adjust our expectations to recognize not only their shortcomings but their strengths. Have we ever considered what they are experiencing? There are at least two sides to every estrangement.
- We don't "get even" by our vindictiveness. We become hardened to the people we resent. Are we clinging to our hostility in order to give ourselves a moral leverage of superiority?
- It may be possible to heal past wounds. We must remember that conflicts fester until we confront them. When we acknowledge them, give voice to them – we may be able to resolve our conflicts. The scars of our yesterday need not mar the mental health of our today.
- Initially, we may not consider face-to-face meetings – not until we have had ample opportunity to identify, process and ventilate feelings of hostility and disappointment.
- When we are ready to "talk," find a time and space without distractions and disruptions. We need to clearly communicate our "inner feelings." What is really troubling us? Remember, this is not meant to be a monologue, recounting past hurts and injustices. The goal is to start a dialogue where we talk and listen to each other.

- Try to focus on the present. We cannot undo what has already been done. Instead of releasing the urge to punish, we need to concentrate on how we can most effectively mend our relationship. ("Yes, I was really hurt when ..." "How can we move forward now.") The aim – to resolve the altercation amicably in order to have a renewed relationship.

- Success may be defined by no longer allowing others to pull our emotional strings (or not too much anyway). Anger is like a boiling point. No one can control how and where it overflows. There is a Buddhist maxim: "not letting go of our hated animus is like stabbing ourselves through the stomach to get back at the person behind us."

- If the priority is just to win the argument, the real catastrophe may be the failure of any possible reconciliation. If the discussion becomes belligerent, we can back off and disengage. We agree to disagree and wait to discover if there may be a more propitious opportunity for a family meeting.

When the Hurt is Too Great

The funeral is over, the flowers at the cemetery have withered and the fractured family continues with enmity and hostility. Thoughts of a meeting, a reconciliation, are dismissed.

Consider making mizpah, a biblical symbol of a possible non-aggression pact. Perhaps there can be no meaningful relationship in the future. Yet, civility is seldom wrong. Just by nodding a "hello" may reduce the anxieties and tensions of future encounters. In this way, the other blameless members of the family would not be penalized.

One doesn't have to always like or love the other. Burning hatred once kindled is difficult to extinguish. Yes, it is an imperfect peace. For the moment, any type of recognition may be enough to continue with greater family harmony.

About the Author

Dr. Earl A. Grollman, a pioneer in crisis management, is an acclaimed writer and lecturer. In 2013, the Association for Death Education and Counseling presented him with its Lifetime Achievement Award, only the fourth time in three decades. This award honours "his national and international impact on the improvement of death education, caring for the dying person and grief counselling." His books on coping with bereavement have sold more than a million copies.

For further information, visit www.beacon.org/grollman.



Finding the Right Words:

Guidelines on how to talk to grieving children about death



By Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

Through the years I have learned a great deal from many grieving children and their families. They have taught me which words work best when talking to children about death. Here are some general concepts I suggest companions use when talking with children about death, dying, grief and mourning.

Talk openly about death

The child's journey through grief depends on you being honest and open about the death he/she has experienced. You may feel that if you are quiet and don't talk about it, you are helping him/her forget about the death and not be reminded of the pain it brings. Yet this kind of protection doesn't help for too long. Of course you mean well, but by not talking about the death, which is foremost on everyone's minds, you only cause him/her to feel confused and alone in his/her grief. It might even make the child feel more afraid.

When talking with children, use simple, concrete language. Until they become teenagers, children are quite literal. Try not to use abstract or complex descriptions for death. It's OK to use the "d" word (death or dying). Explain death in a straightforward manner, without the use of metaphors or analogies such as "passed away," "taking a long sleep," "left us," or "in a better place." Be open to discussing the death and his/her thoughts and feelings about it again and again. That's because healing is a process, not an event.

Share your feelings

A natural part of healing is seeing that others feel the same way that you do. Let the child see you grieving and mourning. Don't be afraid of scaring him/her by letting him/her see you cry. Remember, crying is really an act of strength, not weakness. Crying together is healing. It allows you to express your

A natural part of healing is seeing that others feel the same way that you do. Let the child see you grieving and mourning. Don't be afraid of scaring him/her by letting him/her see you cry. Remember, crying is really an act of strength, not weakness.

grief in a raw and honest way. By grieving together you send the strong message that he/she is not alone in grief.

Be honest and direct

Answer questions simply and directly. Adults may think they need to explain everything, but young children are often satisfied with an honest, short answer. For example, just the first two sentences of this explanation would suffice: "I think it is sad that grandpa died. What do you think? Yet grandpa had a long and happy life. Some people are not ready to die because they haven't done enough, but grandpa did so much. Did you know he was in the Second World War? Anyway, he was blessed with so much. Much more than most people, so in a way I think he was ready to die...."

Avoid euphemisms

Saying a dead person is "asleep," for example, will not only mislead a child, it may also cause him/her to believe that the



If you are a parent or family member, most likely you are also grieving the death of the person who died.

dead person might “wake up” again. Or if you say, “It was God’s will,” he/she might feel angry at God for taking his/her mother, sister or friend away from him/her. Or he/she might believe that God is punishing him/her. Remember, young children take things literally, so such abstractions are often confusing. Also, keep in mind that children can cope with what they know. They cannot cope with what they don’t know or have been “protected” from knowing.

Give inviting, loving non-verbal cues

For children, the language of comfort is often physical – through holding, hugging, snuggling and affection. Spend time simply sitting next to or holding the child. Your close physical presence is a conversation in itself.

When talking about the death or the child’s grief, stay aware of your tone and make eye contact. With warmth, sincerity and a relaxed open face, send the message that whatever he/she says is OK, allowing him/her to express his/her fears and wishes freely. Allow long pauses after questions or gaps in talking for the child to fill or not.

Sometimes it’s easier for older children to talk without direct eye contact or while doing something else, such as riding in the car, walking together, cooking or doing another activity together. Create ample opportunities for these casual, inviting situations.

It’s also important to honour how children best express themselves – and sometimes that’s not through talking. Maybe it’s drawing, writing in a journal, singing loudly, roughhousing,

dancing, doing crafts, watching videos or looking through pictures to remember the person who died. Tune in to the child’s personality and create opportunities for various ways for him/her to express his/her grief.

Attend to your own grief

If you are a parent or family member, most likely you are also grieving the death of the person who died. When you are overwhelmed by death, it’s hard to think of anything else, including the needs of those around you.

It’s important for you to carve out time and honour your own grief. If you are responsible for the full-time care of a child, you will have to do the same for him/her – creating time for him/her to grieve with you and separately. Giving attention to another’s grief can be challenging when grief has shaken you deeply, but try your best to be available to your child, who feels shocked and confused by the death of a family member or a loved one. If, understandably, you just can’t do it right now, find another loving adult who can.

Your child needs full-on love and attention right now – at a time when it might feel the hardest to give. Remember that your grief may look very different than his/her grief. While you may be overwhelmed with sadness, his/her feelings may be more muddled and undefined. He/she may be able to digest just a little of his/her grief at a time before needing a mental and emotional break, while your grief may be all-consuming.

It’s important to ask for help from friends and family; let them take on some of the responsibility of companionship your child through grief. The task may even be too large for you and your circle of friends and family to handle. If so, that’s OK. Enlist a professional counsellor or seek the help of grief support groups as needed. Mostly, be gentle with yourself and know you are doing the best you can.

About the Author

Dr. Alan Wolfelt is a respected author and educator on the topic of healing in grief. He serves as director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is on the faculty at the University of Colorado Medical School’s department of family medicine. Dr. Wolfelt has written many compassionate, bestselling books designed to help people mourn well so they can continue to love and live well, including *Understanding Your Grief*, *The Mourner’s Book of Hope*, and *Finding the Words: How to Talk with Children and Teens About Death, Suicide, Homicide, Funerals, Cremation, and Other End-of-Life Matters*, from which this article was excerpted. Visit www.centerforloss.com to learn more about the natural and necessary process of grief and mourning and to order Dr. Wolfelt’s books.

A Family Tradition of Caring®

Parthemore Funeral Home is providing this complimentary newsletter to you with the hope that the information it contains will be useful to you in working with families who are dealing with the death of a loved one. We believe that your professionalism, dedication and understanding are an important part of helping families that have experienced a loss.

1303 Bridge Street, New Cumberland
774-7721 • www.parthemore.com

