

5 Ways to Help Young Children Who Have Lost Siblings or Close Friends



My youngest son was ten when he lost his twelve-year-old brother. He's now fifteen, and I recently asked him what five things had most helped him heal during his earliest years of grief. Here's what he said:

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1. Playing soccer
2. Community (especially his friends and his brother's friends)
3. His family
4. Ginger (our dog)
5. Playing video games (because they distracted him and helped him stay connected with friends online—although I had to set a time limit!)

Here's what I'd like to offer from my own experience and perspective:

1. Grieve

My family cried together. Talked together. Remembered together. My husband and I were honest about our feelings; we allowed ourselves to express and experience them, and we provided an open forum where our son was free to do the same to whatever extent he wanted.

However, I also needed a lot of additional time and space to grieve by myself and in my own way. This allowed me to be present and stronger for my younger son when we were together. **I did not want him to only see me grieving the son I lost. I also wanted him to see me living for the son I still have.**

I have met other adults my age who lost siblings as children and were told by one of their parents to “get over it” or that it was “time to move on.” Their parent's suffering was so great that they stuffed the pain inside, could barely get off the couch, and were never again present for their other children in the way they needed or would have liked.

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In her book *On Children and Death*, author, doctor, and inventor of the hospice movement Elisabeth Kübler-Ross recommends to: “Experience all your feelings, cry out all of your pain, shed all your tears so you can live again, not only for your own sake but for the sake of your family and all others whose life you can touch!”

2. Support System and Community

We all need someone to talk to about our feelings—but in my experience, children (depending on their age) will determine who that is once the options are presented to them. I exposed my son to talk therapy, but he quickly shot that down. I know other children, both younger and older, who really took to it. I soon explored alternate routes and found that my son processed best through athletics and simply being with friends. Meg Jay, in her enlightening book *Supernormal*, states: “Two of the most powerful predictors of being able to feel good in adulthood after early adversity are sharing our secrets and having people in our lives who support us.” In essence, she says, “Communication creates community,” and community is exactly what I’ve found helped my child’s healing and quality of life most.

Many children need a safe place, separate and apart from their parents, to share and work through their emotions, and making sure they have options available to them is a good start. One of the greatest ways you can help a child who has suffered catastrophic loss is inviting them over and welcoming them into your family. Take them out to dinner. Invite them over to play with your kids. Include them whenever you can for as long as you can. The activity doesn’t matter—and timing can even be last

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minute. If you open your home and family to them at a time when their own family is suffering, you are making a bigger difference in their lives than you will ever know.

3. Play

I have learned that when we play, we heal. When we create, we heal. Sports. Music. Art. Acting. Writing. There's nothing better than a creative outlet to help children (and adults, too, by the way) process their grief and transform it into a hobby or talent they might not otherwise have discovered or developed. As Stuart Brown says in his book *Play*, "Play is called recreation because it makes us new again, it re-creates us and our world."

4. Be of Service

Life can feel so meaningless during times of loss. Suddenly, the things friends talk about make no sense. School, with all its quizzes and tests, can seem so pointless. In these times, it's important to find meaning and purpose fast. The best way to do this is by serving others. Maybe rescue an animal and bring new love into your home. Maybe show up and deliver food or old clothing to a shelter. Maybe get the entire family involved in a charity or start your own that honors the sibling your child lost and serves your greater community. Doing so helps children see that they are not the only ones who have lost and are suffering. Service also reminds them they still matter, and that the world desperately needs them. As spiritual and wellness author Caroline Myss says, "Being of service is not an option. It is a biological necessity. Every kind of action

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we do for someone else is a reanimation of our own life force — and of the other's person's." The bottom line is, helping others will help you and your child in ways that are beyond words.

5. Little by Little, Fill Your Home with New Signs of “Life”

The house often feels lonely and depressing following loss. I lifted mine with flowers and plants. I lit candles to help raise the energy and bring in pretty smells. My family adopted a puppy. And I invited my eldest son's friends over every weekend and gave them a place to be together, grieve together, and heal together. Their voices lifted the energy of our home, as well as created a much-needed support system for my younger son. Eventually, the tears were replaced with laughter, weekly gatherings became monthly—and over time, we transformed both as individuals and as a community, moving forward together.



From my heart to yours,

Nikki

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