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Family bereavement care

Studies have shown that grief after losing a child is more intense and prolonged than after the loss of a spouse or a parent. Children are expected to outlive their parents, and losing one's child has been described as one of the most traumatic experiences possible. While a majority of bereaved parents adjust to the loss of a child without professional help, a significant minority will experience persistent and intensive grief reactions and may need treatment. Siblings are often called “the forgotten grievers” based on the idea that they are not the focus of family, friends, and health care professionals, who often primarily focus on the ill child and the parents.

Unfortunately, research has shown that a majority of siblings still grieve many years after the loss. As research shows that long-term psychological morbidity, including grief, among parents and siblings is affected by modifiable and/or avoidable factors during illness, end-of-life and after the loss, family bereavement care should start early and beyond the child's death. This chapter describes factors that can contribute to the psychological outcomes for parents and siblings after bereavement. Symptom management in the end-of-life has shown important as well as a good relationship between the health care professionals and the parents/siblings during the illness trajectory. Parents and siblings need open and honest communication relating to diagnosis, prognosis and impending death as it allows them to better prepare for the loss—something that are important for their psychological well-being years after bereavement. Bereavement support for the family after the loss is also described in this chapter. For example, it is important for families to have access to the care team after the loss of the child as they have expressed a need for, e.g. remembrance ceremonies and for obtaining more knowledge about the end-of-life care. Parent support groups are much appreciated by the parents, but lack evaluation of their effect. This is also the case for sibling camps. As much of bereavement care is not evidence-based, or not even theoretically-based, more research is needed in order to better facilitate the grieving process and long-term psychological well-being for parents and siblings.