

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

The Indirect Effect of Positive Parenting on the Relationship Between Parent and Sibling Bereavement Outcomes After Death of a Child

Morris, A. T., Gabert-Quillen, C., Friebert, S., Carst, N., & Delahanty, D. L. (2016). The indirect effect of positive parenting on the relationship between parent and sibling bereavement outcomes after death of a child *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management*, 51(1), 60-70. doi:10.1016/j.jpainsymman.2015.08.011

SUMMARY: It is important to understand risk factors in the development of psychological problems for members of families who have experienced the death of a child. This study examined associations between bereaved parental mental health problems and surviving sibling mental health problems, with attention to the role of positive parenting. Results indicated that there were relationships between parental mental health problems and sibling mental health problems and that positive parenting played a role in this relationship for fathers.

KEY FINDINGS:

- The more symptoms of depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or prolonged grief disorder the bereaved mother experienced after a child's death, the more mental health symptoms the surviving sibling was likely to experience.
- Fathers' depression symptoms after a child's death were associated with siblings' symptoms of depression, but fathers' symptoms of PTSD and prolonged grief disorder were not associated with siblings' outcomes.
- For fathers experiencing depression, positive parenting decreased, which was then associated with an increase in siblings' symptoms of depression.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Be aware of the ways in which parental responses to loss of a loved one may impact children in the family
- Include caregivers and children when supporting a family who has experienced a death

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Create support groups for military families who have experienced the death of a loved one so that they can build social networks with people who are sensitive to the context in which their family lives
- Develop workshops to teach Service members and their partners how to use positive parenting even in the midst of mental health problems or other difficulties

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage training for professionals who work with military families that includes information about the impact of parental reactions to grief on their children's well-being
- Support the development of programs for military families who experience terminal illness or death of a child

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METHODS

- Eligible families were recruited by mail. They were enrolled in a pediatric hospice and had a child who died with a surviving sibling between the ages of 8 and 18 years living at home.
- Families who expressed interest were sent questionnaires including information regarding demographics, parenting behaviors, and symptoms of PTSD, depression, and prolonged grief disorder. Each member of the family completed questionnaires separately.
- Data were analyzed to determine the relationship between caregiver and sibling mental health symptoms and how parenting behaviors influenced that relationship.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample included 62 families, with parents and siblings, for 150 total individual participants.
- Participants were primarily White (85%) and most (83%) of the deceased children's cause of death was a medical illness.
- The siblings were on average 13 years old (SD = 3.59); parents' age was not indicated.

LIMITATIONS

- Most of the families in this study lost children due to a medical illness, which limits the ability to extend these findings to families whose children may die due to other causes.
- All of the families in this study were involved in a pediatric palliative care program; these families may differ from families not participating in a way that would affect the results.
- The sample lacked racial and ethnic diversity, so results may not generalize to a more diverse population.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine the grief of military families who experience the death of a child and how parental and sibling reactions may influence one another
- Follow families over time after the death of a child to determine what type of support is needed at different times
- Investigate the experience of families of children with a terminal illness to determine whether programs initiated before the child's death may assist with coping after the child's death

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