

AJR Sarah Vollmann Transcript

0:00:01 - Annncr

Julie Ryan, noted psychic and medical intuitive, is ready to answer your personal questions, even those you never knew you could ask. For more than 25 years, as she developed and refined her intuitive skills, Julie used her knowledge as a successful inventor and businesswoman to help others. Now she wants to help you to grow, heal and get the answers you've been longing to hear. Do you have a question for someone who's transitioned? Do you have a medical issue? What about your pet's health or behavior? Perhaps you have a loved one who's close to death and you'd like to know what's happening? Are you on the path to fulfill your life's purpose, no matter where you are in the world? Take a journey to the other side and ask Julie Ryan.

0:00:44 - Julie

Hi everybody, welcome to the Ask Julie Ryan show. It's where we blend spirituality and practicality to help you live a life of purpose and joy. We have Sarah Vollman on the show with us today. Sarah is a licensed social worker and a board certified art therapist, specializing in grief and traumatic loss. It'll be interesting to explore Sarah's research about the emotional impact on replacement slash subsequent children who were born after the death of a sibling. Please remember to subscribe, leave a comment and share this episode with your family and friends. Now let's go chat with Sarah. Sarah, welcome to the show. I'm so thrilled you could join us today.

0:01:31 - Sarah

Thank you so much for having me, Julie. I'm so excited to be here.

0:01:35 - Julie

Oh, my honor. You say you are a replacement child.

0:01:43 - Sarah

What the heck is that? So replacement child is a term. It's actually a pretty controversial term that not everyone loves, but it's about people who are born after the death of a sibling. I personally like the term subsequent child a little bit better, because not everybody who's born after the death of a brother or sister is really seen or treated like a replacement. But sometimes those kind of dynamics can play out in families and what's a subsequent child Same? It's somebody born after the death. But again, it's such a strange little niche subject that people don't necessarily know what that means.

0:02:21 - Julie

Yeah, Well, when I met you, I'd never heard of it, which is why. But I know people who were born after the death of a sibling and I know that's what your research is focused on, and I thought, oh, we need to have her on the show because there are going to be a lot of subsequent slash replacement children here that are going to listen to you and your research.

0:02:45 - Sarah

Yes, well, thanks, Julie. Well, what I found what's really interesting is doing this research. The more I talk about it, there are people all over the place that are born after the death of a sibling, and even sometimes friends that I've had, and we didn't realize that we had that in common, because it's one of those losses that doesn't necessarily come up and it's kind of one of those unspoken and often disenfranchised kind of losses. So it's kind of interesting. People start coming out of the woodwork when you start mentioning the topic and either it's like oh, my husband is, you know, a replacement child, or you know my cousin, or I have a friend, or I was born after the death of a sibling and you know it. Just, it's more common than you might think.

0:03:25 - Julie

My son's best friend was born after the death of his closest sibling, who lived for two or three days, but from what I'm reading, with your research, it can be a miscarriage, it can be a stillborn baby, it can be a baby that dies shortly after birth or a child that dies at any age. Is that how it works?

0:03:48 - Sarah

That's exactly true. I think the criteria fits for everyone. What it's really about, what I'm really thinking about, is what it's like for someone to be born into a family that's grieving and that's had a loss. And you know, as we know, people grieve for a miscarriage, people grieve for a stillborn baby, people grieve for a stillborn baby, people grieve for a child who is older as well. And so what is it like? What's interesting is that often people assume that something that happened before you were born isn't going to have any bearing on your life or on your experiences. But if you step back for a second and think about, wow, this person is born into a landscape and a family that's been completely changed by. There's a child who died in this family and these parents who are grieving. Maybe there's other siblings who are grieving. So how, you're born into kind of a transformed landscape that's been really touched by loss, but yet it's not really recognized that that might impact you.

0:04:47 - Julie

And how does that differ from the loss of, say, a grandparent that they didn't know, or a friend, or even a spouse? I think of Ethel Kennedy. She was pregnant with her I think 11th child, when her husband, rfk, was murdered, and so that child came in into a family of grief. It wasn't a sibling, but certainly it was palpable grief. And how does that differ between a sibling who's died, or another family member or a friend?

0:05:21 - Sarah

perhaps that's such a great question and I think there would be some parallels if you were born.

You know, obviously it's very tragic to be born into a family where, say, one of your parents dies before your birth, your father dies before your birth, someone dies before, even a close grandparent who dies right before your birth.

If you're born to a parent or parents who are, you know, in the throes of grief, I think that's going to impact you, or parents who are, you know, in the throes of grief, I think that's going to impact you. What I think is unique about being born after the death of a sibling is that you are born into the same role as the person who died. So you know, if somebody were to lose a spouse and then have a baby right after, they wouldn't necessarily look to the baby to kind of fill that void of the spouse. Versus if they lose a child and then have another child, they might kind of be hoping that then this new child will, you know, kind of fill that space in their hearts and make them feel better and now they will have the child that they lost on some level. So that's when it gets a little bit tricky some level.

0:06:28 - Julie

So that's when it gets a little bit tricky. I know your research is the largest and most diverse sample of replacement slash subsequent children ever compiled, so congratulations on that. And I want to do a deep dive into your findings from the children's perspective. You know the replacement children's perspective, the parents' perspective. You know the replacement children's perspective, the parents' perspective and other family members' perspective. So let's talk about the child that's born as the subsequent slash replacement child. What are your findings showing that they have? That are commonalities that you're finding perhaps across the board.

0:07:04 - Sarah

Yes, I want to get into that. I want to give a quick shout out to my co-author as well of the book, Joanne O'Leary. I just want to make sure she's mentioned as well, because it's also her research. She and I have both researched this topic and wrote this book together. And as for the common experiences of subsequent or replacement children, it's really interesting. I ended up, in the research article that I wrote, I ended up coining a phrase called replacement dynamics. Because, like I mentioned earlier, I didn't love the term replacement child and part of my problem with it was that it kind of made people look at themselves or someone else to say either you are or you aren't a replacement child.

And I found that it's really not that simple. Like, say, for example, in a family you're born into a family where maybe the mother really kind of sees the next child as hoping that that next child is going to take the place of the deceased and maybe the other parent doesn't see the child in that way. So maybe they're kind of seen as a replacement by one parent or not another. And it's also something that waxes and wanes, because sometimes, maybe when the child is first born, the parents are kind of looking towards the child, hoping that it's going to make them feel better and lessen their grief. But maybe over time that dynamic might lessen and especially if the replacement child surpasses the age of the one who died, then they can maybe kind of come into their own a little bit more and be seen more as an individual versus as a replacement for the other child. But basically what can happen is that and this can be conscious or unconscious sometimes parents choose to have another baby because they're devastated that they've lost a child and then they kind of maybe put their wishes and hopes onto the child who's born afterwards. And so you can imagine that's really heavy. That's a really heavy weight to bear and I've seen all sorts of that can play out in all sorts of different ways. For example, I talked to people who I talked to, for example young women who were born after the death of a brother, who told me like well, it's really interesting, in my childhood I really became a tomboy and I think that's because you know, my dad was really sad that he was really missing the son that he would have had and wanted a little boy. And again, I'm talking, sorry about the stereotypes here, about gender. I'm quoting the people who spoke to me, but, you know, saying things such as my dad really wanted this son that he could play sports with. So I think that I ended up playing that role and even saying things such as I wonder if I would have been, you know, much more girly quote unquote if I had not been born into this role, where I was kind of born after this boy who was missed. So that's one example.

So, just if you think about identity, it can really be have a formative effect on someone who's born after, if they feel like they're trying to fill a void. And one thing we know is that, you know, children are very perceptive and intuitive and even if things are unspoken, there's kind of this universal need to bond with your parent, to attach with your parent and also to please your parent. You know, children are seeking the love of their parent. So if they have certain behaviors that are, you know, kind of hoped for or validated, they will pick up on that. So they will go to the in those directions. So they will, even if it's unspoken, they might feel these things like oh, dad really likes brightens up when I, you know, play baseball with him, I think I'll play more baseball with him. So you know it can be these subtle things that then kind of encourage behaviors.

Other things we've seen are that they often become they have tendency to become caregivers, which again not surprising. If you're born into a family where there's grief and that your birth is somehow connected to a hope that things are going to be better, you know that's you kind of take that on on some level, that, like you, you sense that and you know that I'm. You know I'm supposed to somehow make my parents feel better. I'm supposed to make my siblings feel better. I'm going to be so many of the people that I interviewed talked about I'm the peacekeeper in the family. I'm everybody's confidant. That's also really really common, is that?

0:11:20 - Julie

typical, though, with children who are raised in a dysfunctional home as well, that oftentimes they can turn into caregivers too, because they are trying to make everybody happy. They see their role. As I got to make mommy happy or daddy happy, or you know, things are chaotic here I just was better if I just got better grades, if I just played nicer or fixed dinner, even though I'm six, you know, it would help my family feel happier. Is that a commonality with kids that are the subsequent kids as well as the dysfunctional children?

0:12:04 - Sarah

Yes, I would totally agree, like children born into family where, for example, parents are using substances, like we know this right that a lot of times those are kids who try really hard to please and on some level those kids, just like subsequent children, are kind of feeling like there's really no room for me to act out or for my issues because there's all this stuff happening here. So they're trying to kind of, you know, hold the family together and pull people together. Then, of course, on the opposite side, we have one chapter in the book talking about rebellious behaviors, because sometimes it also gets to a point where people just rebel and that also can be a really healthy thing, right to a certain point, that sometimes it's the kid who's kind of waving their hands and rebelling, who's kind of saying there's something in this family that's not right, that needs help. So that can happen too. But, yeah, a lot of times there's caregiving, just like, as you mentioned, children in a dysfunctional or problematic family dynamic.

0:12:59 - Julie

You're a subsequent child. So can you tell us, please, about your experience in your life as a child born after the death of a sibling?

0:13:09 - Sarah

Yes, I can. So I had a sister who, so I have my oldest brother who's 11 years older than me. Then there was my firstborn sister, whose name actually was Julie. Like you, she died when she was six and she drowned in an accident. So it was, you know, of course, a completely sudden death. She was healthy. It was completely unexpected. And then my other sister, Ann, was one, one and a half when this happened. So my family was completely just devastated and heartbroken, and I was born about a year and a half or two years after Julie died.

So some interesting things. My family was really heartbroken. My parents told me this wasn't that long ago, like as an adult. They told me oh, by the way, they said you were the only children of all the kids who were planned. They said all the other ones, my mom just got pregnant, but it was actually after Julie died. They were so heartbroken they sold their house and my dad was a professor and they ended up going on sabbatical to Italy for six months and it was something that financially they really couldn't even afford to do. But I think they were just so desperate to kind of hold the family together, find some kind of solace somewhere. So they kind of packed up.

The family went to Italy for six months and what they told me is and my dad was an author, he was writing a book at the time and I guess his way of coping with his grief was he just threw himself into work. He was a very hard worker anyway, but he threw himself into work and the story they told me is one night I guess in this, you know, in Florence, up in their little house in Florence that they were renting my mom. She couldn't sleep because she was grieving. My dad was writing all night because he was grieving, but she came downstairs in the middle of the night and said I want to have another baby. And then soon after that would have been me. So again, you think about your conception, right, and you know where it came from, and you know it came from this place of I think this, you know, sadness and wanting to make things better. My parents. You know it came from this place of I think this, you know, sadness and wanting to make things better, my parents.

You know I've heard a lot of examples about replacement children and replacement dynamics and what I ended up deciding and kind of coming to in the research that what I my theory is that there's kind of a continuum and a spectrum of replacement dynamics, and some of them are really pronounced, like, for example. I always consider it a very bad sign if a child is given the same name as the child who died, which does happen, like, actually, Vincent Van Gogh he was born after a brother named Vincent and given the exact same name, for example. It happens, you know. So some people and some of the people I interviewed, really talked about very stringent replacement dynamics where they were really being pushed to try to do the same things as the sibling. I didn't have it that degree of replacement dynamics that I faced.

What was difficult was my sister. Julie was very idealized, so my mother would always tell us that Julie was a perfect child, and what she would say was she'd say I remember her, even saying you know, I know that all parents who lose a child believe that their child who died was perfect. And she said but I just need you to know Julie actually was perfect. Most of them that's not true, but in our case it is true because Julie was perfect and her proof was, she said even her kindergarten teacher said so that she was perfect. So it was very heavy to grow up with this concept of this sister who I could never live up to, who was perfect, and there were even stories which later I kind of had to wonder about a bit.

But as a child, you know, you just take them in. Like my mother would say well, Julie would always, whenever I'd go grocery shopping, Julie would come and help me and put all the groceries away. And then it wasn't kind of until I was an adult I thought she died when she was six Like I mean, how could she even reach the cabinets to put all the groceries away? Like that doesn't even make sense, right? But these were the family stories that were told and this was the way that she was presented in the family, which was really painful. And it was also really painful to see the sorrow of my parents and also the sorrow of my siblings. Like it definitely impacted every single person in my family in very different ways and I know we would have been a completely different family if this hadn't happened. That's my belief.

0:17:54 - Julie

Did your sister that was between Julie and you? Did she feel some of the same pressure to be perfect like Julie who had passed, or was hers very different from your experience?

0:18:08 - Sarah

I think she did, I think we all did in certain ways, because we all heard about Julie being perfect. My sister's situation is kind of interesting and actually at some point it's another topic I want to research. But she was a baby who experienced this loss in the family when she was pre-verbal. So I think that's also someday that's another thing I want to research kind of the impact on someone when you know you have this loss that's pre-verbal and you think about how that impacts. And even my mom had the clarity at one point to talk about, to say you know that she felt kind of bad and she had this memory of feeding my sister Ann, right after Julie had died, and said it occurred to her as she was feeding her that this couldn't be good for Ann because she said I'm feeding her and I had just tears just coming down my face. I couldn't stop crying as I'm feeding this baby.

So you think about your babies. As we know, it's such an important time developmentally that you're looking to your parent to attach, to be soothed, to be reassured. So if you have suddenly, from one day to the next, this parent who is just terribly bereft and who's weeping and crying as they're feeding you. What impact does that have? Right, and it does.

0:19:21 - Julie

We know it does right Right, not to mention the neural pathways I've read are laid. Most of them are laid in utero and then the rest of them are laid down in the first two years of life. And

we're so kinesthetic as fetuses certainly you know that boom, boom, boom of the heartbeat. It's all about the beat, it's all about how it feels and babies pick up on that. They pick up when the mother is stressed or grieving, or I think they pick up. I believe they pick up even if it's not the mother, even if they're in a, if the mother's in a situation that there is somebody around who's grieving or having a tough time, or something along those lines. Has that come up in your research?

0:20:11 - Sarah

Yeah, I'm really happy you're bringing that up, because that's also something else we talked about, which is also what is the experience, even pre-birth, for people who are born after.

And another thing that's really complicated is attachment for those of us born after the death of a sibling, because a lot of times parents might be, even though they maybe want to have another baby after losing a child, they might be terrified on some level to attach to the subsequent child because they've just lost a child.

And so if you're carried, so first of all to think about being carried in the womb of a mother who is still actively grieving and what that impact would be, and if the mother then feels so terrified to attach to you because she's lost another baby, what the impact of that will be. And then, even after you're born, if you have a parent or parents who are fearful of attaching to you, how that's going to impact your relationship with your parents. And we also know that attachment impacts your identity formation, your well-being, your ability to attach to other people in life, all those things it's a crucial piece of, like our development. So if your attachment is impaired because of this loss, which I think it often is for people born to grieving parents how that's also a really tough impact.

0:21:26 - Julie

I've read also that those neural pathways that are set in utero and then in the first two years of life, if there's drama and trauma happening, that it makes those children and then later adults be more prone to anxiety and depression. And I've also read that the way to help heal that and I'd love to hear your input on that is with music, with exercise, with walking. The beat of the footsteps mimics the mother's heartbeat and that baby feels safe when it hears the mother's heartbeat. And then the 50-year-old, who's always anxiety-ridden if they just go for a walk I know research has been done that shows they're not necessarily paying attention to that step, step, step, step, but it's a rhythm and it mimics the mom's heartbeat and so unconsciously it calms them down. Have you heard about that? Have you heard about?

0:22:27 - Sarah

that. Have you read about that? I have. I'm not an expert on that, but I have read a little bit about that and it makes perfect sense to me. And it's great to think about the ways also that people can heal and compensate and, you know, have positive experiences, you know, later in life, maybe with their parents, later in life in their own growth, there definitely are plenty of avenues for people to grow and kind of heal these parts of themselves that maybe these things that were difficult at the onset. So that's a great example.

0:22:58 - Julie

I want to get into those in a minute. Before we do that, I want to hear what have you found in your research? Is a commonality, perhaps, that the parents feel? And then also, what are the other siblings feel and what are their feelings towards the new sibling? Is there a situation where the new sibling is like, well, this is the princess and nobody can own up to her, because she's the replacement child and you know, and she's just perfect in every way? Did you find that as well? Did you experience that? Were you the princess of the family?

0:23:38 - Sarah

I was very close with my dad and you know I was very, I was very loved, you know. So you know there was the tough things about being compared, but I also was very loved. But I love what you're talking about right now about being like the princess Cause another piece of the research that that we found that was interesting, um, and I actually ended up breaking it into two different categories, cause I was. You know, when we think about replacement children, like traditionally, what we think about are the people who are born after, who then can never live up to the deceased right and who kind of feel like they're never good enough. But there was another category that I found in the research that I ended up naming the gift child, which were children who were born, and what was interesting is, a lot of times those were children who were born after the death, like maybe a stillbirth, a miscarriage or a very, very young baby, so who had less of a formed identity, to kind of quote, unquote, replace, and so in some situations the replacement child then became an idealized child as well. So instead of idealizing the deceased, sometimes there's idealization that can happen to the child who's born after. So instead of idealizing the deceased. Sometimes there's idealization that can happen to the child who's born after.

So in those cases I called them like a gift child role and I got some great interesting stories about people like my mother prayed that she'd have another daughter and then she had me and she thinks of me as this gift from God and I really came and I helped my mother and I'm so happy that I could. So all those positive things. So obviously there were positive things about it. And then yet at the same token, it still was a replacement role in some ways and so I think there still was kind of a heaviness to it as well, that like still an awareness that I'm also born to kind of make everything okay and if somehow I don't live up to being this gift child, I could become an inadequate replacement right. So it's still. I think it's probably an easier role to walk in than being an inadequate replacement, but it still has its own heaviness.

0:25:34 - Julie

And what are the commonalities of the adults who are the replacement slash, subsequent children? What are you seeing in their behavior patterns and their lifestyles and their life journeys? Are there commonalities with them?

0:25:50 - Sarah

Well, I found that many people were in the helping fields. Look at me, I'm a therapist. Many people went on to be in the helping fields like a you know kind of a strong showing for that, which again ties into like the you know, being born to be helpful, and then even some people who maybe didn't necessarily have a job in a helping field, that were people doing like tremendous amounts of volunteer work to help others. So there was definitely some pieces of that that I saw as commonalities in the adults there's also, you know, there was a lot of pain for a lot of people.

People talked about, you know, feeling inadequate, growing up, like really having to struggle with low self-esteem because they felt like they could never measure up to this idealized lost sibling and some people who really had struggled with their relationships with one of their parents or both of their parents sometimes it had was born, her mother was still so upset that the mother moved back home with her own parents and she was raised by her dad pretty much with like she'd see her mom occasionally, but her mom basically missed the first year and a half of her life and her mom later apologized to her and said I'm really sorry, I missed out on all your babyhood. But I just couldn't, I just couldn't deal with it, and she then had a really tough relationship with her mom, although later in life there was some mending that happened.

0:27:28 - Julie

Have you found examples of? All children are telepathic. All children are intuitive. Have you found examples of the subsequent children communicating with the spirits of their deceased siblings? Did that come out? Were people willing to talk about that?

0:27:50 - Sarah

Yes, it was interesting. There were some people who talked about and it was often from the child perspective more than from the adult perspective, which is so it's interesting that you're saying that. But you know there were. I remember there was one child who said something along the lines of you know, like, yeah, you know, I was walking down the stairs and I was about to fall, but then I knew that, like my, my sibling caught me.

There's a lot of like perception of the sibling as kind of a helpful angel by many people, adults and kids.

But there were some of the kids who talked about seeing the sibling and another one who talked about when she was a child and she said she was afraid in the night and I guess had a bad dream and got up from her room to go into her parents' room and she said that she saw her deceased brother there in the hallway and then she said I always just thought that was really interesting that he came to see me and he was there for me. And then another really moving story was a woman who, when one of her parents was dying and was really took on this caretaker role with the parent and was very, very involved and it was getting close to the end and then she said all of a sudden she was driving and she was just, she was so exhausted and so bereft that this parent was about to die and she had this vision of her brother and that he kind of came and said to her you've taken care of him all this time. I've got it, I'm going to take over from here. How sweet is that.

0:29:18 - Julie

Oh, I love that. Oh, I love that. I have, through the years, had mothers and grandmothers want me to do kind of an instant replay of their baby's bedroom because it seems, in the toddler years especially, some children go through this period where they just start wailing in the middle of the night and the parents think, oh well, it was just a bad dream. So I can do an instant replay, like replaying a football touchdown, you know, on TV, and I've seen this many, many times, Sarah. It cracks me up.

Every time there are spirits in the room, whether it be a grandparent or a sibling that could have even been a miscarried baby or others, and, like in Toy Story, the toys come alive when the spirits are in the room, you know, like Woody and Buzz Lightyear and all those guys, they come alive and so they're entertaining this baby in the middle of the night, this toddler who's having a ball with all of them, and then, for some reason, then they go away and the toddler's just mad and the parents say, well, he's just having a night terror. Well, he's not having a night terror, he's having a nighttime party with all of these spirits in the room. Have you heard anything along those lines? I thought whoever wrote the Toy Story screenplay, they knew woo-woo, because it's a real thing.

0:30:49 - Sarah

Yes, well, at first I just have to say I love Toy Story, one of my favorites. But I'm trying to think if I've heard anything quite like that. Maybe not quite like that, but really you know the sense of the sibling being around, the sense of seeing the one who did see her sibling and then many, many people who really carry the sibling with them as this kind of positive presence, this angel, this person looking out for them. Also, another thing that's very common is a lot of subsequent children feel like they have to kind of carry the sibling with them and then kind of do good in the sibling's name. It's kind of like well, I'm living for two now, right, so I have to make sure that



I do good things. I have to do things to honor my sibling, I have to do good in the world because I'm the one who lived and they're the one who died. So that happens too.

0:31:46 - Julie

Yeah, yeah, that's a big gosh, that's a heavy burden right. Yikes, yes, wow, wow. But you found that your siblings or the parents that you studied received comfort from talking with the spirit of the deceased baby or child through a medium or through some other methodology. Did any of that come up?

0:32:18 - Sarah

Yes, Well, there were several parents who talked about kind of having an ongoing connection to the deceased. I think there was one with a medium and then some that just in their own ways kind of like. I remember one person had this box that she said she would open and that she kind of kept the baby's things in there and she knew the baby was present with her. So definitely having that continuing bond and trying to be in connection with the lost child was really really important for many people.

0:32:49 - Julie

Research shows that it's one of the most effective ways to help people who are grieving is to be able to communicate with the spirit of their loved one, whether it be a child, whether it be a child, or whether it be a 105-year-old grandmother or somebody like that.

0:33:08 - Sarah

Yes, yeah, absolutely. And another thing that I was really taken aback by was that in our sample and some of the people we interviewed, there were numerous people who also did regression experiences and tried to kind of re-experience their own birth experience, their womb experience, which I just thought that's fascinating that from this sample there were several people who did that, and to me that really pointed to how so many people who are born after are really kind of questioning you know what was it really like for me to be carried in this womb of a grieving mom, and trying to kind of piece together the meanings for themselves is part of their healing.

0:33:45 - Julie

Are departed children normally discussed, and is that helpful in most families? Are the parents even aware of the effect that they're having on the subsequent children?

0:33:58 - Sarah

So that is a great question too, and, as you can probably imagine, we saw I saw just this whole arc of different experiences. So anything from the deceased child being a complete secret, there are people that we interviewed who were never informed that they had a deceased brother or sister, and then they stumbled upon, you know, photos hidden in a drawer and the family, then the parents, then had to tell them, you know. So there was that kind of thing and then up to a point where parents who talked about it a lot and it's interesting, you know, I think every family is different and every family has to find their way. There's no right or wrong way, but I think what is right is trying to have some kind of balance. So there was one woman I spoke to, for example, who talked about how her mother would constantly be bringing up the deceased sister and how it just felt like a lot like even in random conversations she'd be inserting things about the deceased. It just felt very kind of overpowering Another person who grew up in this house where there were all these drawings that were made for her deceased sister, that people had written the deceased sister's name on, and she grew up in a room and so her bedroom was the room where her sister had lived, and so all of her wall space was covered with these drawings that were dedicated to her deceased sister.

And so she said, when friends would come over they'd say, oh, who is so-and-so, and she'd have to explain about her deceased sister.

And she said you know, I wish my parents could have just put away some of those pictures. It just was too heavy, it was too present. But then in the families where it wasn't talked about at all, there was a lot of regret. And even some families where it was talked about some but not a lot, they said you know, it's this taboo topic. Sometimes people felt like they couldn't bring it up because they were upsetting their parents to bring it up and they wanted more information about their brother or sister. So it really wasn't healthy not to talk about it enough. And it also wasn't great if it was talked about too much or if the grief was too present all the time and churning all the time in the family, all the time in the family. So trying to find some middle ground where the deceased could be remembered and included but the family could still be kind of invested in their current life and the current people who were there, I think is the key.

0:36:11 - Julie

Is there an age that's appropriate, where it becomes appropriate to talk to a child Like is it three or four or five or younger? Number one and number two in the situation where the parents don't want to talk about it or the subsequent child doesn't want to bring it up to upset the parents, is there a common other person to whom they can go, like a grandparent or a friend of their parents, or perhaps an aunt or an uncle who knows information that they can share that helps ease some of the unspoken about pain and also curiosity of the subsequent child?

0:36:59 - Sarah

Yeah, that's an interesting point. I did speak to some people who had other people that they were able to go to. I mean, again, obviously it varied. Sometimes people were helped by those relationships and by being able to talk to someone else in the family. Sometimes people didn't have them.

And one thing that I think is sometimes common for subsequent children is I remember one man I spoke to who, just you know, he would try to talk to his older siblings about it, or try to talk to his mother about it, and the older siblings, even when they were all adults, would get very angry at him if he would ask any questions of the mom because they'd say you're upsetting mom, You're not supposed to talk about this, you're not allowed to talk about this. And he basically was given the message like this is not yours to talk about, like you have no right. So I think that's also kind of a common experience, that there's the sense that this happened before you were born. You have no ownership, this isn't your loss. You can't, you're not allowed to ask too much or upset people, you have no say in this, you have no ownership of this, although then you're also growing up in a situation where it's deeply impactful, and it was your sibling, so that's also a very painful thing.

0:38:06 - Julie

Mm-hmm. Okay. Yikes. Well, when you were doing your book *Born Into Loss*, was there anything that just really surprised you, especially being a child who was a subsequent child? Was there something that your research showed that you were like, oh my God, that's out of left field. I never would have thought that was the case.

0:38:29 - Sarah

Well, the whole gift child thing I really wasn't aware of until I did the research, those people who were born, who you know, into this role of kind of being like the idealized child that came after. That was interesting. And another term I'll bring up that I think may be familiar to a lot of people. Talking about that is a term that's become popular in our society these days is rainbow babies, which again is kind of an interesting thing. You probably know what that is Like people are calling sometimes usually it's for people who've experienced, like a stillbirth, a miscarriage

or a loss of a very young baby but then they call the baby that comes after this term rainbow babies. And it's interesting to me and I know this is controversial, because many people really love that term, they find it very soothing, they find it very helpful. I personally worry a little bit about that term because for me it really is linking the identity of this baby born after to the one who died and kind of saying you're the rainbow after the storm. You know your role is to make things better. I mean it's, you know. And of course everybody loves rainbows, everybody, you know. Everybody loves babies, everybody loves rainbows. You know it's a sweet little term but, like when we think about it, it's kind of reinforcing those types of dynamics that aren't so positive. So anyway, back to your question. The gift child thing surprised me.

Another thing that was kind of touching to me was that many people that I interviewed said I've never been able to really talk about this to anyone, I've never explored it at this length. And also, can you tell me what other people are saying? Because there's no book out there about this? There's no. I've never met another person who has been through this Like.

So just how siloed their experience was, how alone people felt with their experience and people saying to me am I normal? Are other people like me? Have other people had these experiences? Oh, one thing, Julie, you'll love to hear is that some people questioned if they were the reincarnation of the baby. That was something that I hadn't thought of, but that happened and there were several people one person who still believed that he was the reincarnation of his brother and another person who said he went through a lot of time really questioning that and it was a spiritual questioning that he went through and he said ultimately he decided that he was his own, separate person and he was not a reincarnation, but that that's something that sometimes people go through, and that was something that I hadn't thought of before.

0:40:55 - Julie

It's been my experience that it's not a normal thing. I think maybe I've come across one person in tens of thousands of people with whom I've worked that was a reincarnation of a deceased sibling, and I'm not so sure it was even a sibling. It wasn't Actually, it was the grandmother, and it was one of my graduates. And my graduate said that her, her daughter, was three or four at the time. She said she's at the kitchen table, she was cooking dinner and her daughter was sitting at the kitchen table and she was coloring. And she said mommy, you're going to have another baby and it's going to be grandma's spirit coming back. And grandma wasn't even dead at the time. And my graduate goes what? And so she texted me going. What's this child talking about?

Well, within a year, grandma died and a week later, my graduate was pregnant with a baby girl who was born nine months later and acts just like the grandmother. And the four-year-old said mommy, you know, this is going to happen. That was wild. That is wild, yeah, yeah, that was wild when that happened. Well, let's pivot for a minute and let's talk about what kind of help is out there for people who have lived this situation like you have, and how can they help resolve some of these feelings that they've experienced in their childhood and even in utero, and how can that help them live a more productive, joyful life as adults? I know you do a lot of art therapy. Can you tell us about that and then other different resources that are out there for people that are in finding themselves to be subsequent slash replacement children?

0:42:54 - Sarah

Yes, yes. So thanks, Julie. Yes, I am an art therapist, and one thing I love about art therapy is that a lot of unconscious and unspoken things can be expressed in art therapy. So sometimes, when people have things that they're not aware of or things that are kind of coming into consciousness, they can come out. So working with an art therapist is always a great thing to do. I would recommend. What is art?

0:43:15 - Julie

therapy. What do you do? Do you just sit down and start coloring with crayons or what's?

0:43:19 - Sarah

it entail. So art therapy is a lot of things. So I want to just say, um, art therapists work with pretty much every population, it's not only for children. Sometimes people think it's assumed that it's people work with adults. Um, kids, elderly people work with trauma, work with substance abuse, any type of issue that you might have therapeutic intervention with. You could have an art therapist working with you and it's basically a modality in which we're trained to use expressive arts.

I'm an art therapist, so I use the visual arts primarily. But, yeah, and it's, there's many different ways that I can use it. For example, if I was sitting down with someone who was grieving for somebody, I could be more directive and I could say, for example, would you? It would always be an invitation, but I'd say, are you interested, maybe in making a memory box to commemorate the person that you lost? And again, there's no, the nice thing about art, there's no right or wrong way to do it. They could sometimes people bring in, you know, pieces of fabric, of the clothing of the person that they lost, photos, and they, you know, maybe they incorporate that into the box and it becomes this very meaningful kind of memorial object and part of creating. It becomes really kind of this ritual of memorializing the person, sharing about the person, working through your feelings about the loss, sharing about your relationship with the person.

A lot of things can happen and sometimes art therapy is more open-ended, that you know. Sometimes I work in an open studio format and there's all these supplies and people can choose from them and they find their way to kind of express whatever it is and sometimes they're very surprised by what they end up creating and they might think they might start in one direction and then they let it evolve into something else and it could be anything from collage to clay to painting. I mean, the sky's really the limit and with kids a lot of times what I might do is sometimes the art things then become play things. So it becomes like an art and play therapy. Maybe they make a doll who then has a voice, who then is speaking and moving, and so it's a very flexible kind of modality.

0:45:31 - Julie

What are some of the examples of paintings and clay formations and things like that that you've seen, that you thought were really extraordinary, and then what were? Just some common ones?

0:45:48 - Sarah

Well, there was like one bereaved mom I was working with who she came in to work with me. She had lost a child who was a young adult, and she came in to work with me in this art studio and she had these scraps of fabric and she'd had a quilt made of her child's clothing. But she had these leftover scraps. And so the session started with her sitting with me and saying, like I have these leftover pieces and I don't know what to do with them, which just if you would listen to that phrase, like how sad and symbolic and powerful. That is right. I don't know what to do with these leftovers. I have these pieces and they feel too precious to me, these pieces of you know her child's clothing, that they're too precious to me. I can't throw them away. I don't know what to do with them. So we sat and we talked and she ended up deciding to make a box to commemorate her child, who had died by suicide, by the way. So it was really such a painful loss.

But to begin again and everyone does it in their own way to begin, she decided to write a letter to her child. So she sat quietly and she wrote a letter and she put it in an envelope which she then put inside the box and then she glue gun this box shut. So it was almost like this burial,

like it was kind of a. It felt very much like a ritual that she was writing this letter and kind of holding it in this sacred way. And then she wrapped the box with these pieces of fabric from her child's clothing and then again with the wrapping there was a piece that was kind of reminiscent of swaddling a baby. I mean, she's taking cloth and she's wrapping and wrapping and wrapping, and here it is, this piece for her child and these are pieces of her child's clothing. And then she added things that were symbolically meaningful, that reminded her of her child. Some of the things, the pieces of clothing that were left, were pieces of like pockets of a shirt, et cetera. So then she had this playing card that she put in she put like the ace of hearts and said my child was always like my ace and you know so there and then wrote little messages and put them into little pockets and it just was such a.

In the end she had this box that was so imbued with so much feeling and symbolism and she said, and she was. She hugged it close to her chest and said she knew where she was going to keep it in her house and it became this really important object for her. And in doing this too, a lot of it's also about the relationship that you have with the person who's sitting with you. So she was sharing, she. She shared with me a little bit about her journey and this loss, this suicide loss of her child. So it was a very powerful. It's not only the box that you make, it's also the whole process. So, like I say, the way you use the supplies, the way you're interacting with the therapist in front of you, the whole trajectory of the experience and it was very powerful.

0:48:24 - Julie

That's what was going through my mind. Is from a therapeutic standpoint. Is it that she's expelling some of these pent-up emotions by going through the sequence of events of writing a letter, putting it in the box? I mean all of that? Is that all part of being able to release some of those emotions? Is that what you're seeing from a therapeutic standpoint, and how does that affect her life going forward?

0:48:57 - Sarah

So there's yes, there's peace of release, and then there's also peace of kind of trying to integrate these things, because a lot of times when we have these terrible losses, it's like we don't even know how to sit with it. We don't know, like we're just left in the shambles right. We are left with these broken pieces lost, a child to suicide. So you're taking something that's formless and starting to try to give it a new form, which you know also is very symbolic of like trying to kind of recreate a life, a life that holds the loss, that holds the person that you used to be and now is trying to like, integrate, like this new person that you're becoming, because obviously you're so changed by losing a child.

0:49:41 - Julie

Back to the subsequent children and the different types of therapy or support that are out there. Your research is really groundbreaking and is paving the way to have more information really cultivated about this situation with these children. So where does one go to find some support with this topic?

0:50:10 - Sarah

Yes, so I'm happy that my book's out there. I'm hoping that my book maybe will be helpful for some people. There's a website also I want to recommend, called on the Replacement Child Forum. I'm on the board of the Replacement Child Forum and it was founded by three of my colleagues and friends. Each of them wrote a book about the topic. Judy Mandel wrote actually it's a New York Times bestseller. It's her memoir about her experience. She was born after her sister died. There was a plane crash. A plane crashed into her family's home and, yes, and her sister died, so she wrote a book about it. You know it's called the Replacement Child. It's like I said, it's a New York Times bestseller. And then my two other colleagues too who also wrote books. You can find all the information. It's the Replacement Child Forum and they also

have resources on that website. So that's another place. And then I also just encourage people to seek out therapy, also to have conversations in their families.

For some people there's a lot of healing in being able to try to have conversations with their parents. I think one thing that's very tricky about this role is that no one ever wants to be angry, resentful or upset at a bereaved parent, even if the bereaved parent, you know, treated a child like a replacement, and that was painful, you know. I think all of us have such compassion for our parents who lost a child. So sometimes it's very hard, I think, for people who are born after to kind of advocate for their own needs or to ask questions about what they need to know. I think there are ways to kind of do that gently, that respect the parent, but that also validate the needs of those who came after, Because we're people too, we, you know, we matter too, you know, and sometimes later, talking to parents, talking to siblings, I know that's been very healing for some people.

Sometimes it's not, Sometimes they hit an impasse and sometimes it's through talking to others finding a good therapist. But definitely bringing this up in the therapy, Because I think this is also something that's often missed in therapy which is another reason that we wanted to do this research is that just it can often be a loss off the radar. Therapists sometimes are working with people who had a sibling who died before they were born and they never even know this right, Because it just doesn't come up. It's something that's such old history.

0:52:46 - Julie

Well, I think you're doing groundbreaking work, and your book certainly is, as I mentioned, is the largest body of research heretofore on this topic, and it's obvious to me that you chose to come in to experience this so you could help others who are in the same position. And now you're getting all that alphabet soup at the end of your name. I know you're going to graduate with your doctorate here in a couple of months, from Tulane, so congratulations on that, thank you, that's a serious feat, so kudos to you on that, especially as a mom and a wife, goodness and working full time.

Last question why do we incarnate?

0:53:34 - Sarah

Why do we incarnate? Tell me more about what you mean. Why do you?

0:53:38 - Julie

think you chose to be born. Why do you think your spirit wanted to come in at this time and place? I mean, I just went into my little dialogue about I think that this is part of your life's work, obviously, but why do you think, in general, we choose to come in and incarnate in this human existence?

0:54:04 - Sarah

Well, you know, I do feel like it is. This has been my life's work. I mean, you know, I kind of laugh at myself a little bit. I'm like, okay, I was born into this grieving family and I become a therapist who specializes in grief and loss, and there I went right. So it certainly was formative. I really can't imagine my life or myself without that experience. I really love my family. I mean, maybe in some ways I did want to come in and try to be helpful for them, if that's even a thing. I love my siblings, I love my parents, who aren't here anymore, but loved all of them. So I don't know, you know my path, at least here. It's hard for me to speak to what happened before, but at least here it's been. I've always been kind of focused on being in service.

0:54:49 - Julie

Yeah. So, we're here to serve others yeah, to help them with whatever their path is, and we explored along the way is what I'm hearing from you. You explored it first and now you're

helping other people explore theirs. Yeah, I hope to that's my goal. Yeah, it's obvious. How can people learn more about you and your work?

0:55:12 - Sarah

So my book is on everywhere that anyone can buy it. You know, Sarah Vollmann, on Amazon they can find it. I have some other book chapters. It's also all on Amazon. People can easily find my work if you look me up there and the name of the book the name of the book. Do you want to see it? I have it here.

0:55:31 - Julie

Are you going to hold it?

0:55:32 - Sarah

up Born into Loss. Here it is so, and that's me. By the way, in case anyone's curious, it is a picture of little me, so it's called Born into Loss Shadows of Deceased Siblings and Family Journeys of Grief. I co-authored it, Sarah Vollman, with Joanne O'Leary, and you can buy it Amazon, anywhere the books are sold, and, yeah, I'd be thrilled if people want to read it and your forum again tell us what that is. It's called the Replacement Child Forum, so that's you can just Google that and find it online.

0:56:08 - Julie

Okay terrific, alrighty everybody. We all know somebody who was born after the loss of a sibling or a miscarried baby or whatever. So share this with your family and friends and let them know that, no, they're not the only one that has experienced this and that there is help for them out there to continue to explore this and to help them live a wonderful life as an adult by working through some of these emotions that they went through as a child. So, in the meantime, sending you lots of love from Sweet Home, Alabama, and from Massachusetts too, where Miss Sarah is, dr Sarah, almost Dr Sarah is, and we'll see you next time. Bye, everybody.

0:56:59 - Annncr

Thanks for joining us. Be sure to follow Julie on Instagram and YouTube. At Ask Julie Ryan and like her on Facebook. At Ask Julie Ryan To schedule an appointment or submit a question. Please visit [AskJulieRyan.com](http://AskJulieRyan.com).

0:57:14 - Disclaimer

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