

Children's Grief

A guide for parents to help their
children following a
*Miscarriage, Stillbirth or
Newborn Death*



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The Unthinkable Has Happened

When a baby dies due to miscarriage, stillbirth or newborn death the hearts of the family break. You probably have feelings of shock, disbelief, anger and sadness. While you may be consumed with your own pain, you might also be worried about how to tell your other child(ren) that the baby has died.

The death of a baby is a time of crisis and stress in a family and children can sense that something is wrong. Children need to be included in this life experience. They may be feeling confused, sad, curious and afraid. They may be feeling guilty or worried that something could happen to them or to you. They may think they are to blame for the baby's death because of something they said or thought especially if they had mixed feelings about the new baby.

You may be grieving so deeply right now that the idea of helping anyone else seems impossible. However if your grief keeps you silent and withdrawn, your child may let his/her imagination take over and this can be worse than working through the grief with you.

This booklet contains suggestions about how to talk to your child about the death; some ideas about what to avoid; important things to think about regarding your child's age and concept of death; and things you can do to help your child grieve.

How To Tell Your Child That Their Sibling Has Died

It is never easy to talk to children about death. Remember you are grieving too and need to be gentle and patient with yourself and with your child(ren). No two people grieve in exactly the same way and there is no right way to grieve.



- Use open, honest and simple explanations. Let your child know that the baby has died. You may say something like; “The new baby inside of mommy has died”; “The baby was born dead” or ”The baby’s body stopped working.”
- Share your feelings. You may say something like “We are very sad because now the baby will not live with us as we had hoped and planned.” Or “ I am very sad because the baby died. When people are this sad it sometimes helps to cry. I know I will feel better but it will take time.”
- Children learn from their parents by example. The way parents grieve is assumed to be the right way and children will tend to follow that pattern. They can experience the same overwhelming emotions as adults but may not have the words to describe what they are feeling. By hearing how you feel they are able to find the words to describe their feelings. This helps make their feelings less frightening.
- Encourage your child to express their feelings verbally, through play, or through art.
- Your child may have many questions about why the baby died. When you know this, offer simple explanations in words your child can understand. If you don't know the reason then tell them you don't know. Reassure your child that nothing they did or thought caused the baby to die.

- You may want to describe the baby, offer to let the child(ren) see the baby or see pictures of the baby. You know your child best and will know how involved they should become.
- Give lots of love and reassurance. This will help your child feel safe.
- You may want to give some examples from nature such as the bird's egg that did not hatch or a puppy or kitten that was born dead.

Try To Avoid:

- Using words like “lost” or “went bye-bye” as this may cause your child to think the baby is coming back or will be found. Children need to know that death means the baby is no longer alive and will not be coming home to live with your family as planned.
- Saying the baby is “sleeping” or “went to sleep and didn’t wake up.” This may cause children to be afraid to go to sleep for fear this could happen to them.
- Stating the reason for the death was that God needed the baby or the baby was too perfect for Earth. This can cause fear in children and promote resentment towards their faith/God.

Age Makes a Difference

A child’s understanding of death varies with age, the child’s development, and their previous experience with loss.

There are differences in reactions and common behaviours that may be seen in different age groups.

Here are some guidelines about what to expect for various ages and a few suggestions regarding what parents can do to help. Each child is unique and matures at his or her own level; therefore they may not fit neatly into the following categories, but may overlap.



2 years old and under

- Prior to 6 months old there is no concept of death or grief.
- There are beginnings of grief and mourning after 6 months old.
- Fear of separation – loss of physical or emotional presence of parents causes anxiety.
- May respond more to parent’s reactions to the loss. Can sense the upset of those around them.

Behaviours:

- May become irritable and clingy.
- Refuse to let parents out of their sight.
- They may sleep more or less, eat more or less, cry more, suck thumb, or bite.
- May regress in speech and other skills.

What parents can do:

- Give child lots of physical comforting.
- Keep child’s routines as consistent as possible.
- Try to spend some quality time each day with your child to help increase their feelings of security.

3 to 5 years old

- See death as temporary or like a prolonged sleep.
- Difficult to comprehend death as a permanent state.
- They don't understand the intense sadness of others.
- May fear for their own safety and well-being.
- May not be able to put their feelings into words.
- Have egocentric/magical thinking – may think they are somehow responsible for the death.

Behaviours:

- They may ask questions about death over and over as preschoolers learn by repetition.
- May become withdrawn, irritable, or demanding.
- May regress and behave more like a baby (eg. thumb sucking, bedwetting, baby talk).
- May have increased anger and play more aggressively (especially boys).
- May use the theme of death in their imaginary play.
- Have increased need for soft, cuddly toys.
- Often have complaints such as stomach ache.
- May have increase in nightmares or fear of separation at bedtime.

What parents can do:

- Explain what death is.
- Ignore/accept regression in child's behaviour and praise age appropriate behaviours.
- Find out what child thinks happened to the baby and give reassurance that they did nothing to cause the baby to die.
- Give simple, clear explanations.

6 to 12 years old

- Understand death as a natural process and it could happen to them, therefore death is more frightening at this age.
- Can understand that death is permanent.
- Their conscience is developing and they may feel a sense of guilt.
- They want to find a reason for the death.

Behaviours:

- May act out because they don't know how else to handle their feelings.
- May daydream, and be unable to focus.
- School grades may drop.
- They may appear as if unaffected or uncaring yet inwardly they are very upset or use denial as primary defense mechanism.
- Child may not talk about the baby for fear they will make you feel sad – this protective role can be overwhelming to a child.
- May want to become independent.
- Withdrawal.
- They may take on the caretaker role with parents or other family members.
- They may react with fearfulness, i.e. fear of the dark/fear of death.
- Complaints of aches and pains.

What parents can do:

- Encourage your child to share their feelings and share your feelings with your child.
- Be a good listener and arrange to spend quality time with your child.
- Give permission to cry or not to cry.

Adolescence

- Concept of death is like that of an adult.
- May be interested in the biological details of the baby's death.
- Generally have very strong feelings about the injustice of death.
- Search for spirituality and answers to philosophical questions.

Behaviours:

- May seem indifferent on the surface because they are so preoccupied with their own identity, but these young people are often hiding intense turmoil.
- Become more independent.

What parents can do:

- Listen rather than offer solutions.
- Accept their feelings and their right to ask questions.
- Encourage expressions of their feelings.
- Let them tell you what they need.
- Share your own bewilderment explaining that some things in life do not make sense or are not fair.

Things You Can Do To Help Your Children As They Grieve

It helps to maintain your child's normal routines as much as possible. Avoid making major changes such as moving, changing schools or daycares.

Continue to keep the usual limits you set for their behaviour.

Encourage your child to express his/her grief through play; art; writing a poem/song; listening to music; or storytelling. Be creative with your child. Let him/her be your guide regarding what they need at this time.

You may want to describe the baby, offer to let the children see their baby brother or sister, or to see pictures of the baby. You know your child best. You will know how involved your child should become.

Consider creating a memory keepsake of the baby with your child. You might include mementoes such as the baby's hospital ID bracelet, lock of hair, footprint/handprint, photo, a special drawing your child has made, a poem or letter from your child to the baby.

Many children's books about grieving are available for children of different ages. It may help to spend time reading one of these books together which will allow your child to talk about his/her feelings.

If there is going to be a funeral or memorial service, consider allowing your child(ren) participate in some way. They may want to put a keepsake in the casket or suggest a piece of music or a poem for the service. They could light a candle or read a special poem. Allowing them to participate prepares them for the funeral and helps them to grieve. Participating can help lessen the fear and anxiety. Give your child the choice to attend the memorial or not. Don't force them to do anything they are uncomfortable doing.

Remember to be patient with yourself. Grieving is hard work but it is the natural way toward healing. You may need some extra help right now. Consider asking a relative or close friend to be available to your child at this time.

Helpful Resources

- Public Health Nurse 604-983-6700
- Lion's Gate Hospital Social Work Counselor 604-984-5810.
- Pregnancy Loss Support Group, B.C. Women's Hospital 604-875-3788
- Spiritual Care Coordinator at Lion's Gate Hospital 604-984-5894
- B.C. Bereavement Foundation 604-738-9950
- Griefworks B.C. 604-875-2741 or Toll Free 1-877-234-3322
- Compassionate Friends 604-986-9954 (Vancouver) 604-293-1790
- Empty Cradle Support Group 604-525-4347
- LGH Children's Grief Group 604-988-3131 local 4701

Online Resources:

www.griefworksbc.com
www.compassionatefriends.org
www.bcbereavementhelpline.com
www.empty-cradles.com

Online catalogue of bereavement resources:

www.centering.org
www.parentbooks.ca
www.wintergreenpress.com
www.griefresourcescatalog.com

Recommended Readings

- Bell, J. and L.S. Esterling (1999). *What Will I Tell the Children?* Omaha, NE: University of Nebraska Medical Center Child Life Department and Munroe-Meyer Institution.
- Bell-Russell, K. (1989). *Guiding Children Through Grief.* Omaha, Nebraska: Centering Corporation.
- Bereavement Services (2001). *Talking With Children About Perinatal Loss.* La Crosse, Wisconsin: Gundersen Lutheran Medical Foundation.
- Gryle, M. (1988). *No New Baby.* Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation.
- Ilse, S. (1992). *Empty Arms: Coping with Miscarriage, Stillbirth, and Infant Death.* Maple Plain, MN: Wintergreen Press.
- Ilse, S., L. Hammer-Burns and S. Erling-Martinex (2003). *Sibling Grief: After the Death of a Sibling as an Infant, Including Miscarriage, or an Older Child.* Maple Plain, MN: Wintergreen Press.
- Johnson, J. et al. (1999) *Miscarriage: A Book for Parents.* Omaha, Nebraska: Centering Corporation.
- Kohn, I. and P. Moffitt [with A. Wilkins] (2000). *A Silent Sorrow: Pregnancy Loss - Guidance and Support for You and Your Family.* London: Routledge
- Johnson, J. et al (2000). *Children Die, Too. For Parents Who Have Experienced the Death of a Child.* Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation.
- Johnson, J. et al (1992). *Where's Jess?* Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation.

Papenbrock, P.L. and R.F. Voss (1990). *Loss: How Children and Teenagers Can Cope with Death and Other Kinds of Loss*. Issaquah, WA: Medic Publishing Co.

Scherago, Marcia. (1987). *Sibling Grief: How Parents Can Help the Child Whose Brother or Sister has Died*. Redmond, WA: Medic Publishing Co.

Tapp, L. (1998). *No Smile Cookies Today*. Pregnancy and Infant Loss Center, Inc.

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