

Information and support for relatives and friends

This section is written for grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles, colleagues and friends of the parents. Each of you reading this might have had a different relationship with the baby and their family. We are very sorry that a baby who was important to you has died.

We know that this is a very sad and difficult time for the baby's parents, for you and for the whole family. It is important that you access support yourself if you need it and be aware of the impact that the death has had on you and those around you.

Grieving for the baby

The death of a baby at any time during pregnancy is a major bereavement for the baby's parents. However, how the death affects the wider family isn't often fully understood. Not everyone realises the need for other family members or close friends to grieve or to share their distress.

Some people change the subject if the baby is mentioned, or unknowingly say insensitive or hurtful things. Often they don't know what to say or are frightened of causing more distress. Many bereaved parents say that some friends and acquaintances cross the road to avoid having to talk to them, or stop talking to them altogether. You may find that some people do the same with you. You might find it helpful to view this animation: <https://www.sands.org.uk/finding-words>.

It is possible that you might grieve both for the loss of the baby and for the loss of your own hopes and dreams. You may also grieve for the parents too. It can be extremely upsetting to see someone close to you in distress and be unable to protect them or to take their pain away. If you are a relative, you may also experience difficult feelings

of guilt if the baby had a hereditary condition even though there was nothing anyone could have done to prevent it.

For some relatives and friends, the death of the baby might also bring back painful memories of their own experience of having had a baby who died. Until the 1980s, the death of a baby was often not recognised as traumatic and most parents did not receive much understanding or support. Parents were likely to have been told to forget about their baby, to have another, and to carry on as though nothing had happened. They may not have been allowed to see or hold their baby, or make any special memories. However, even with sensitive and supportive care, the grief that follows a baby's death remains and may be reawakened many years later.

It is normal to experience strong emotions of sadness and loss. You are welcome to access Sands support resources and the Sands Helpline. If you are finding it hard to manage everyday life or work, you may want to seek professional help. You can make an appointment with your GP and explain how you are feeling. They can refer you for specialist help and support if needed. You may also like to seek counselling directly. Please do get in touch with the Sands Bereavement team to help you with this.

Care from health professionals

Parents are usually offered a number of choices about how they would like to give birth, what they might want in terms of making memories and spending time with their baby. There are no right and wrong decisions and parents need to decide what is best for them. Depending on the situation you may also be invited to be involved. It is always important to try to take your cue from the parents rather than imposing your views or needs onto them.

Details about labour and giving birth are in the section *Giving birth to your baby*.

Seeing and holding the baby

If a baby is stillborn or has died shortly after birth, parents are asked if they would like to see and hold their baby. For many parents, the time they spend with their baby becomes a precious memory. Not all parents will decide to see their baby. The parents may ask you if you would like to see and hold the baby. If they do, and you feel this is something you would like to do, seeing the baby can give you precious memories to share with the parents in the future. It can also be helpful for parents if someone else has seen and perhaps held their baby. If the parents invite you to see or hold the baby, and you do not feel able to do so, it is important to let the parents know in as gentle a way as possible.



If the baby died in neonatal care, you might have already seen and held them while they were alive. You might have visited them in hospital and bought them presents. You might have seen them in an incubator with numerous tubes and in only a nappy. This might be the first time that you are seeing them clothed and without tubes.

Creating memories

Parents may want to create memories of their baby and, depending on what they decide, you may also want to ask about creating your own keepsakes.

If the parents decide to have photos taken, these photos may include some of the baby alone, with one or both parents, with brothers and sisters, or with you or other family members. You may want a photo to keep and perhaps display at home.

Remembering the baby

In addition to the grief of the parents, many family members and friends will feel waves of sadness when other children they know, who were born around the same time, start nursery or primary school, or begin to be independent. A living child's progress is inevitably a reminder of what might have been. You might want to acknowledge various anniversaries for yourself as well as share them with the baby's parents.

Offering support

Offering support can feel complicated. The extent to which you want or feel able to be involved, can be affected by your relationship with the baby's parents and how you have dealt with shared problems and grief in the past.

Some parents need time and privacy and want to work things out on their own. They may want to talk to you but they may also prefer to talk to someone else, or use one of Sands Bereavement Support Services.

It is important to listen to the parents to understand what support they need. Everyone grieves differently, so offering a form of help that might have been beneficial for you in the same situation might not be helpful for them.

If they refuse your offers of help or want to be alone, you may feel hurt or excluded. However, they need to do what feels right for them at the time. This does not mean that they will not value further efforts you may make to support them when they are ready. They may also be so distressed that they cannot appreciate your offers of help.

It can be difficult to find the right balance between being supportive and being intrusive. It can also be hard to show bereaved parents that you care without saddening them with your own grief, making them feel that they need to support you, or that your grief “overshadows” theirs. They may need to be reassured that you care about their baby and about them; however, it is important that they should not feel that they have to comfort you. The Sands Bereavement Support Services Team is available to support parents as well as other family members and friends.

Relationships can come under additional strain when there is a bereavement, and grief may make it harder than usual to see other people’s points of view and to accept different ways of doing things. It can be helpful to remember that remarks about how you think the parents are coping, or advice on how you think they should be grieving, can feel hurtful. Being there to listen is often the best form of support.

In addition to providing support to the parents, you might find that you grieve together. This could be helpful as long as each person is doing what they need at the time. It can be useful to allow time to grieve separately as well.

Getting support for yourself

It can be extremely hard to offer support under these circumstances if you do not have support for yourself. Having a safe place, where you can express your own grief and pain, can be very helpful. You may have your own friends you can contact. You could also contact Sands for support; our support services are available for parents, families and anyone else who has been affected by the death of a baby.

Using the baby's name

If the parents have named the baby, and they would like people to use the baby's name, it is important that you do this as well. Using the baby's name is an important acknowledgement for many parents. You may also want to include the baby when talking about how many grandchildren, cousins, nieces or nephews you have, but ask what the parents would like you to do.

Supporting partners

You may notice that most people focus on supporting the birth mother and assume that her partner will be able to support her. People may not realise that parents who haven't physically given birth may also be profoundly affected by the death of their baby; as a result, their needs and feelings may not be recognised. In addition to experiencing their own grief, partners are often also witnessing the birth mother's pain and distress and may appreciate being asked how they are and having their own pain recognised.

It is often the partner who has the hard task of breaking the news of the baby's death to family and friends and of coping with their shock and pain. If the couple already have children, they may also need to find a way of ensuring that the children are cared for and to explain to them what has happened. When the mother is ill, or if her life is in danger, her partner may also face additional fear and worry.

Adoptive parents and foster parents

Prospective adoptive parents and foster parents might be awaiting the arrival of a new baby. It is important to recognise the death of the baby as the death of their baby as well and to support them as they need. While they might not be actively involved in preparations for the funeral, or be making other practical decisions, they will have still experienced a loss. They may need to explore their own ways to mark the death of the baby and could benefit from support. You might like to help them by asking what they need.



Becoming parents through surrogacy and surrogate mothers

If the baby was born through surrogacy, one or both of the parents would be genetically related to the baby. Even though neither would have been pregnant with the baby, as intended parents, they would

have still experienced the death of their baby and need support. Surrogate mothers, i.e. those who are pregnant but do not intend to become parents through the pregnancy, may still need support after the death of the baby. Although they may not necessarily be genetically related to the baby, they may still need to grieve for the baby and face many of the same challenges as any birth mother would.

Relationships between couples

The death of a baby can place a huge amount of stress on a couple. It can be very difficult for couples to find mutual support in each other as they grieve, especially as they may not feel or need the same things at the same time. They may also find it hard to understand and sympathise with each other's reactions and behaviour.

If a bereaved couple feels angry and hurt by each other's behaviour, it can also be tempting to "take sides". However, it may be more helpful if you can try to support both parents.

Single parents

A single parent may never have had any support from their partner or may not have had a partner. Alternatively, their relationship may have broken down during the pregnancy or as a result of stress caused by their baby's death. They are likely to need a great deal of support from their family and friends and it is important to offer support if you feel able.

Younger parents

Young parents are also likely to need a great deal of practical help and support even if there are two parents involved. This may be very important if young friends are unable to provide the support

that the parents need or if they are not around.

It is really important that young people are not judged for being pregnant and that it is not assumed that the pregnancy was a mistake. If the parents are still at school or in education, there may be student support services available. Sands is able to work with these services to ensure that support is offered in a sensitive way.

Funerals

If the parents have decided to have a funeral for the baby, you could offer to help them with organising it. They may need time to decide what will be right for them. This can be difficult, especially if there are different ways of doing things or differing religious beliefs in the family. You may be able to offer the parents support and time to make the decisions that feel right for them as well as help them explore the options available.

Helping around the house

In the early days and weeks after their baby dies, many bereaved parents find it extremely difficult to do everyday things, such as cooking, housework, shopping, sorting out bills, or walking the dog. Parents may find it helpful if you are able to offer to help with some of these types of things. However, parents may also need privacy sometimes, even if they want you to be around at other times. It may be helpful if you offer to leave after providing some help. On the other hand, if they need you to stay for a while and you have only limited time, it is best to let them know this early in the visit.

Clearing away baby things

Sometimes relatives and friends try to protect the parents from further pain by removing equipment and clothes that were bought for the baby. It is really important to check carefully as to whether this would actually be helpful. Many parents prefer to clear away

the baby's things themselves in their own time, even though it may be weeks or months before they feel able to do so. Doing this in stages might help them with the grieving process and it is very important not to rush the parents into getting rid of or donating things that they might have had ready for the baby.

Other pregnancies and births

Some bereaved parents find it distressing to be around expectant or new parents and babies. It can be very hard if another family member or friend is pregnant or has a healthy baby. It can also be difficult for the parents of a new baby; they may feel constrained and unable to celebrate their baby's arrival as they would like. It is important to recognise and acknowledge this and maybe give bereaved parents a private opportunity to meet a new baby when they are ready.

Other relatives and friends

You might find that the parents rely on other relatives and friends more than on you, and this might feel painful for you. Be aware of prioritising the parents' need for help over your own need to help. There can often be a rush to help initially but there will be a need for ongoing support for many months and years.

Other children

Even though babies and very young children might not understand what has happened, they are likely to be sensitive to the feelings of people around them. Their behaviour may change. For example, they may become clingy and dependent, and their eating and sleeping patterns may change.

This can be very hard for grieving parents who are already exhausted with grief. If it is possible for you to help with childcare, this could

help them have some time for themselves. Being looked after by a trusted relative or friend who loves them may also help children to feel cherished and important. However, it may be better for some children to remain in their own home and spend time with their parents and with you.

It is important that parents tell their children what has happened. What a child is told will often depend on the child's age and ability to understand, the questions they ask, and the parents' decisions. It can be helpful if you know what has been said and discussed with the children. It may also help if you try to use the same words and phrases, and avoid giving more information than the parents have agreed.

You may also notice that the parents change their approach to caring for their living children. For example, some parents may react by becoming very protective of their children. Other parents may "relax the rules". It is important to try to understand that the parents are doing the best they can in extremely difficult circumstances.

Fundraising in memory

Many friends, family and colleagues choose to raise money in memory of the baby and as a way of showing their support to the parents. From making a donation to organising a fundraising event, doing anything in memory can provide a real comfort to those who know that their donations are going to help others going through difficult times. There are loads of ways you can do something tangible in their memory. Do visit our website www.sands.org.uk/get-involved or contact our Supporter Care team on 0203 908 5525. You might like to talk to the baby's parents to make sure that they are happy for you to carry out any fundraising in memory of their baby.