

About the other children



Parents are often anxious about how their children will be affected by their brother or sister's death. As each family is different, it is not possible to tell you exactly what to do. What we have tried to do is share some of our thoughts about what can be a help to your child after your baby's death.

Children of different ages perceive death in different ways. The quality and degree of their understanding may be quite unrelated to age. Sometimes it will be easier to explain the death to a small child. Depending on the child's past experience, each child will have an individual way of coping.

It is best if parents can be open and honest with their children. When children sense that something is being hidden or kept back, the 'something' can be exaggerated in their minds and become far worse than it actually is. For example, when some children sense that a tragedy has happened in their family they assume that it is the mother who is in danger.

Children do not need very complicated explanations; simple ideas like – "The baby died because she didn't grow properly. Mummy and Daddy are very sad, but will feel less sad as time goes on", often will do. Allow them to ask questions when they feel ready. Again keep answers simple and honest. Explanations such as "Jesus was lonely, so He took baby to keep Him company" or "Baby is being looked after by the hospital" may have unexpected and frightening implications to the child about what will happen next time Jesus is lonely or the child is ill.

Some parents feel unable to mention their baby at all on their return from the hospital. They go in to have the baby and come home empty handed, and, because of their emotional distress don't feel able to explain why. This can lead to the child suppressing his curiosity, picking up the cue that there are secrets which are dangerous or forbidden to talk about. This can make the child very afraid without being able to express his fear, except possibly by clinging to his mother. Do try and talk to your children about your baby that died.

Where possible include the children. If you wish your children to see their brother or sister please discuss the matter with the staff. There is no reason why they should not see and even hold their dead brother or sister, or attend the funeral, and visit the grave or garden of remembrance. Provided this can be presented as normal after a death has occurred, children usually take things in their stride. If parents feel worried about how they themselves will react they should ask someone to help.

After their baby dies, some parents feel that the world is unsafe and that something terrible may happen to their other children; this may lead to them becoming over-protective. It is also common to react by resenting their living children's demands when they feel the need to give time to thinking about their dead baby. These reactions of over-protectiveness and resentment can be bewildering and upsetting to the children. Sometimes children may take on an 'ill role' as that brings out the over-protectiveness which is less painful than the rejection. This can reinforce the parent's belief that the world is unsafe and you can find yourself visiting the GP frequently. If you are worried about this, discuss it with your health visitor or GP.

Most children, however young they may be, feel guilty after the baby dies, and blame themselves, thinking that jealous, angry thoughts or actions could have killed the baby. This normal guilt feeling is usually present in the parents as well. It is important that parents bring the matter up by saying something like, "it was nobody's fault" and indicating that guilt is normal, and they too have it even though they were not responsible.

Children will grieve in their own way and at their own pace. Some may not show their grief until they feel that their parents are better. However, it is healthier if they can express their grief quite soon after the baby dies. If a child only starts showing her distress many months after the death, parents can be confused as to the cause. Often a talk about what happened; allowing the child to use toys to play out the events can make all concerned feel more in control. Children will often use toys in play to help themselves work through their bewilderment and distress. The way they do this can be upsetting to adults who are not usually as blunt over death as children can be.

Children, like adults, may use jokes or giggling to hide or avoid an overwhelming anxiety or sadness on hearing of their baby brother's or sister's death. This can be bewildering to parents, who are not expecting such a reaction. Because the child may see it as commonplace to have a baby die in the family, children can upset adults by asking pregnant women or couples with small babies when their baby is going to die. This can be their way of understanding their sadness and muddle about why babies die. You can help your child by having a discussion that enables them to see that not all babies die.

If your child is at school it is important that the school knows of the tragedy that has occurred. Very often your child's concentration at school will be affected. They may have a shortened attention span, and their work may suffer. It is usually assumed that their friends will be understanding.

However, some children have found themselves being jeered at in the playground because of the baby's death. This adds to their distress, but is something they do not always feel able to discuss at home because it may increase your distress. You can give them an opening by asking about how they are managing at school, and finding out who is being supportive, and who is being unpleasant. You can help them to understand that it is often fear that something as frightening may happen to them that leads children to behave in that way.

The next pregnancy can be a very anxious time for your child. Their experience will have taught them that in their family, pregnancy can end in death. It is not uncommon for children to start bedwetting and soiling again. Parents cannot promise that everything will be all right; they can explain that not all babies die, and they too are anxious about the outcome. Often the bedwetting will disappear after the safe delivery of the next child.

Often parents are surprised by their child's reaction when the next baby is born. Many become over responsible towards the baby, and may be extremely anxious if the baby becomes ill. This is because some children do not trust the next baby to stay alive. Often these reactions develop because children feel that their feelings of jealousy are so destructive that they may have killed the last baby. By talking about it you can help them to learn to tolerate their jealousy by understanding that these are normal feelings.

About Sands

Sands, the stillbirth and neonatal death charity, was founded in 1978 by a small group of bereaved parents devastated by the death of their babies, and by the total lack of acknowledgement and understanding of the significance and impact of their loss.

Since that time we have supported many thousands of families whose babies have died, offering emotional support, comfort and practical help. Sands today operates throughout the UK and focuses on three main areas of work:

We support anyone affected by the death of a baby

Bereavement support is at the core of everything we do. Some of the services that we offer include:

- ▶ Helpline for parents, families, carers and health professionals
- ▶ UK-wide network of support Groups with trained befrienders
- ▶ Online forum and message boards enabling bereaved families to connect with others
- ▶ Website and a wide range of leaflets, books and other resources.

We work in partnership with health professionals to try to ensure that bereaved parents and families receive the best possible care

We undertake a comprehensive programme of training, workshops and talks for health professionals based on the Sands Guidelines which give practical guidance on how to meet parents' needs and provide good bereavement care.

We promote and fund research that could help to reduce the loss of babies' lives

In spite of medical advances, the shocking reality is that each day in the UK there are eleven babies who are stillborn and six who die within the first 28 days of life. Through our Why17? campaign, we are raising vital funds for research, while challenging government to address these individual tragedies as a matter of urgency and priority.

We depend on the extraordinary energies of our supporters to raise the vital funds that we need to deliver the wide range of services that we offer.

If you would like any further information or support please contact us or visit our website.

Contact Sands:

3rd Floor, 28 Portland Place, London, W1B 1LY

t: 020 7436 7940 **f:** 020 7436 3715

e: info@uk-sands.org

w. www.uk-sands.org

Support:

t: 020 7436 5881

e: helpline@uk-sands.org

Sands message boards:

www.sandsforum.org

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