

Be a good listener

Grieving people need to talk about their loss, acknowledge that they have been through a difficult experience. You can't fix their grief but you can be there, hear their story, and share their journey.

Be a shoulder to cry on

Allow them to cry with you, crying helps the release of emotions and this helps with healing.

Be in touch with them

Drop in, call on the telephone and say "I was thinking of you today" write a letter, send an email, remember special days like Christmas, birthdays and anniversaries.

When someone has experienced a loss, there will be big and small adjustments to be made in their lives. These could bring uncertainty, frustration, fear, sadness and change as each new day comes along. Grief is about adapting to change in life, thoughts, hopes, beliefs and the future.

Be a friend

Often being there is all that is needed to support someone who is grieving.

(Adapted from the writings of Doris Zagdanski)

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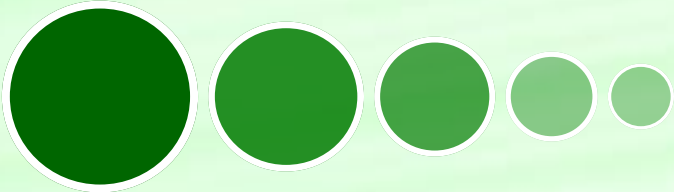
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Talking to Children after the Loss of a Baby





**Mummy why are you so sad now?
Daddy, is it something I did?**

**Mummy, when will our baby be back?
Daddy, we can't leave the baby alone.**

It's difficult enough for adults to deal with the death of a baby or a miscarriage. We at least know what death is and have our beliefs as to what follows and our knowledge as to what causes it. Children, particularly younger ones, don't have this understanding. They must try to understand the facts of the situation and the reactions of those around them while having a very limited understanding of death and its consequences.

Children grieve too. They need the same understanding and compassion as given to parents. Unfortunately they are often overlooked by others and even sent away to be "entertained" after a tragedy has occurred. To deal with the loss of their baby brother or sister, children need security, the reassurance of their relationship with their parents and clear explanations that suit their age and comprehension level.

At times, children may seem unaffected by a death or miscarriage. In some cases, this may be the case. A child may have been told that his/her mother was pregnant, but without the obvious signs of pregnancy, he/she may not have really understood this. Hence when an early miscarriage occurs, children may not really be aware of what they have lost. They may be disappointed but not particularly upset. Parents may need to explain their own sadness over the miscarriage and reassure children that this is the cause of any changes they see in their parent's behaviour.

At other times, children are affected by the death but may not appear so. They may continue to play happily. Children are often unable to express their thoughts and feelings but their confusion may become evident through changes in their normal behaviour. Children's reactions may be the result of their feelings toward the baby, both good and bad, or children's attempts to deal with what is happening around them and their parent's behaviour. If your child's behaviour changes from what you are used to, you may need to consider that they need some assistance in dealing with the death or miscarriage and its consequences. Behaviour changes may include:

- Withdrawal from parents, friends, and teachers.
- Fighting, hitting, irritability, argumentativeness, moodiness, temper tantrums.
- Whingeing/whining.
- Refusal to go to school, preschool, kindy or daycare.
- Fear at being separated from parents.
- Going back to doing things you thought they had outgrown.
- Bedwetting.
- Sleep disturbances, "bad dreams".
- Appetite changes.
- Refusal to talk/baby talk.
- Becoming fearful of many things. Eg. monsters.
- Loss of interest in things/loss of concentration.

Explanations about what has happened to the baby are important. To explain the death or miscarriage appropriately for a particular child, you need to find out what the child understands by death and what led to the death or miscarriage.

The Developing of Death

Children do not understand the concept of death as do adults until late childhood to early adolescents when they can deal with abstract concepts. Before this, the level of understanding of death varies among different age groups of children. Below is a short outline of what you may expect from different groups of children. These are only guides. Some children will develop earlier, some later than others. It is very important to remember that each individual child develops at his or her own rate. You must check out your own child's level of understanding about death, if you are to explain what has happened in a way he or she can comprehend.

Babies/Very young toddlers:

- No concept of death.
- They react to your behaviour rather than the death.
- Need close contact and reassurance from parents.

Toddlers:

- Concept of "here" and "not here". If the baby is "not here", they may think you can find him/her.
- No idea that death is permanent.
- May believe baby can come back and ask when this will happen.
- May need simple explanations over and over again.

- May be affected very little, depending on parent's reactions.

Preschoolers/young school age child.

- Have encountered death in nature so can relate it to their experience.
- Will not realise death is permanent and will happen to them.
- Often very interested in the facts about death and dead people.
- "Magical" thinkers who may believe something they thought or did caused the death.
- See themselves and what they do as the centre of the world.

School age child/ pre-pubescent child:

- Beginning to understand death is permanent and affects all people though not necessarily themselves.
- Need more details about what happens at the funeral and to the body.
- Need reassurance that their death is likely to be a long way off.
- May personalise death, eg. The Boogey Man.
- May see death as having a definite cause. Eg. getting very sick, running on the road. Look for causes.
- Beginning to understand some abstract concepts like afterlife, family, death.

Adolescent:

- Adult understanding of death. Needs the same chance to express thoughts and feelings.
- If having communication problems with parents, may withdraw further.
- May concern teenage girls that this could happen to them.
- Grief may be made worse by the moodiness of adolescence.

Adapted from An Ache in their Hearts Resource Package © 1993

