

For Teachers and Carers of children 0 – 5 years who experience the death of a sibling

You are now confronted with the situation that every teacher and childcare worker will, at some stage in his or her career, have to face. Caring for/teaching a child who has lost a sibling through miscarriage, stillbirth or neonatal death. In Australia each year 55000 babies die through miscarriage, 1, 700 babies are stillborn and a further 900 babies die within 28 days following birth.

When confronted with this situation it is common to feel at a loss, concerned about how to handle the situation, wonder how you can help this child, his or her family and the other children in this class. We hope that this pamphlet will assist you. Since the topic of death is filled with sensitive emotional issues, think about your feelings and how you might react while talking to children.

Remember that children deserve honesty and the truth and find it less confusing. Reviewing the stages of development and children's understanding of death may help you to feel more prepared. Remember a child's understanding of death greatly influence how he or she will grieve, not whether or not they will grieve.

Teachers see children every day in a consistent and structured environment. Often children will say or do things in school that they would not do at home. The teacher's involvement can be a significant influence on a child's grieving.

What you need to know/what to ask the parent(s).

- Religious beliefs of the family.
- What is the name and sex (if known) of the baby? Are they comfortable with you using the baby's name?
- What does the sibling under your care know and how has what happened been explained to them by their parents. It is important to know this in detail. Children need consistent information. Please do respect and support the parents' decisions in this area.
- What were/are the funeral arrangements.
- Do the parents want feedback?
- Are the parents happy for you to let other parents of the centre/school, and anyone in contact with the family, know of and acknowledge their loss?

Talking to the parent

If the parents haven't already approached you, attempt to make first contact. This could include a phone call the day before the child is due to start back, ask the parents if they would like to come in a half hour earlier for a private discussion. Most parents will appreciate the effort and be happy to come in.

It's OK to be upset and don't feel you need to hide your emotions. The parents will appreciate knowing that their baby's death has affected you.

It is important to give feedback to parents if their child had a bad day or if certain issues were raised. It is also important to be approachable and open to discussion with the parents so they can also provide you with feedback.

Please don't use clichés like “You can have another baby.” “At least you already have children.” “It’s for the best.” “It’s God’s will.” These may be partially true but they deny the individuality of the child and his or her importance to the parents.

Please don't say “I know how you feel”, unless you also have lost a baby and even then you can’t know exactly as everybody’s grief is unique.

Please do accept their feelings regardless of whether or not they seem rational to you . There is no ‘normal’ way to react.

Supporting the child

Please to be willing to listen and encourage discussion of the death by the child and the child’s story of his brother or sisters’ death.

Please don’t use euphemisms such as “Your baby brother went to sleep.” This may result in a child being afraid to going to sleep. Be direct and honest, giving simple truthful explanations, following the guidelines given by the child’s parents.

The most important point is to keep discussions consistent with what the child has been told by his or her parents. If you are unsure simply say, “I don’t know. You had better ask your parents about that.” Then tell the parents what occurred. Discuss emotions. Talk about your, other people’s and their sadness, how it feels and that it’s OK to feel sad. Explore other feeling the child may be experiencing themselves or in others around them eg anger, guilt, fear and that something is missing etc.

You may notice a change in the way children play or in the subject of their art. This is normal, play and drawing are the main ways children work things out, they need opportunity and support to explore what is happening to them and around them in this way. Keep in mind the child’s personality. If there is a change in the child, it may be an indication that he or she needs some extra support or help in dealing with what is happening.

Dealing with classmates and school/centre community

It is important to let parents of the school or childcare centre, and anyone in contact with the family, know and acknowledge the loss (after discussion with the parents). The sibling’s class needs to be made aware of what has happened. Group discussion is important. Remember ‘talking time’ cannot be planned, although many children will use “Show and tell” as a time to show pictures of other mementoes of their baby brother or sister and tell his or her story. If you hear children talking about death encourage them to share their thoughts with you and their classmates.

Encourage children to draw pictures, tell stories, or write about the baby, the even or the family as a way of expressing their feelings. In many cases the class will spontaneously decide to send the pictures or stories to the grieving family. Encourage this as a way for children to acknowledge the death and also reach out to others.

If a child becomes upset, comfort him and make a mental note to share the observations with the child's parents.

Grieving is a long-term process

As children learn and grow, they might need to 're-work' the death to fit into their new knowledge and awareness of the world. For this reason children may wish to talk about the miscarriage, stillbirth or neonatal death weeks, months and years later.

If the sibling remains in the same school/centre the following year, make sure their new teacher is aware of the situation. Having a new baby will bring up new issues. The pregnancy will be filled with worry and anxiety alongside the joy for both parents and the child. *Please don't* say things like "don't worry" or "it will be alright this time".

Grieving is time consuming for children, the family and all those involved. It is hard work. It is a normal process that as human beings we encounter again and again in our life. How we grieve and how we are supported in our childhood can affect how we grieve as adults.

Children's understanding of death

In infancy children can sense the distress in those around them. They fear for their own security in these circumstances, these children need reassurance that they will be cared for. Some regression in behaviour may occur.

Under fives do not see death as a permanent state. They may ask if they can go and collect the baby from hospital, and find it difficult to understand why it can't be done. They are still very concerned with their own security. They sense the distress around them and may worry that they have caused it. Some regression may occur in this age group.

Five to eight year olds are beginning to understand permanency of death. They too may hold themselves responsible for the death and need reassurance that they have done nothing to cause it. These children need clear and careful explanations of what is happening. What is burial? What is cremation? Some children may become quite aggressive while others may become very quiet. Other changes in behaviour and a lack of concentration may also occur.

Where to go for help

- Libraries and bookstores have many books on the child's understanding of death. This pamphlet includes suggestions for children's reading.
- Consult with the school nurse, child study team, or school psychologist if you feel the need.
- Self-help groups are available eg SANDS (QLD) Inc, for children, parents, families, friends and professionals.
- Remember your own needs during these difficult times. Loss reawakens old feelings in most people.
- Talk to your colleagues. Mutual support and networking with other teachers and mental health professionals is very important.

Books

Tell Me Papa. By Joy & Merv Johns (Death in general)

When Dinosaurs Die. A guide to understanding death. By Krasny Brown & Marc Brown (Death in general)

A Bunch of Balloons. By Dorothy Ferguson (About loss)

Molly's Rosebush By Janice Cohn 1994 Whitman & Co (Miscarriage)

No New Baby By Marilyn Gryte (To read to children)

I know I made it happen By Lynn Bennet Blackburn (To read to children)

Lifetimes. Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen 1983 (To read to children)

Jake's baby didn't come home (Stillbirth) , **Kate's baby didn't come home** (Neonatal death), **Lisa was going to be a big sister** (Miscarriage) by Judith Murray. 1983 University of Queensland (To read to young children)

The Seasons of Grief, Helping Children Grow Through Loss. Dr Donna A Gaffney (For all adults supporting children)

Sibling Grief. After Miscarriage, Stillbirth or Infant Death. Ilse S Burns, L.H Erling S.

For further information please visit

www.sandsqld.org.au

or contact the state office
(07) 3254 3422



This information sheet was written in consultation between medical students of the Graduate Medical Course, University of Queensland, child carers, preschool and kindergarten teachers, bereaved parents and children of the Stillbirth and Newborn Death Support group.