



## For Teachers and Carers of children 6 – 12 years who experience the death of a sibling

In Australia each year 55,000 babies die through miscarriage, 1,700 babies are stillborn and a further 900 babies die within 28 days following the birth. Hence, it is not uncommon for a teacher at some stage in their career, to find themselves caring for children who have experience the death of a sibling within his or her family.

Death is a sensitive and emotional issue which our society often has difficulty discussing. As a teacher guiding the development of young children, the situation may be even more complicated. Not only do you have to confront your own feelings and beliefs but you will also have to consider and respect the needs of the child and his or her family.

Seeing children everyday in a consistent and structured environment puts teachers in the position to assist the family in both monitoring and supporting the child after the loss of a sibling. 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.

This brochure may help you to feel more prepared by aiding your understanding of how the developmental stage of a child impacts on their perception of death and subsequently, their process of grieving.

### **Approaching the parent**

When first receiving the news of the death, it is normal to feel shocked, confused, embarrassed, be speechless or upset. It is okay to express these feelings as the parents will appreciate that their baby's death has affect you and to know that you care about what has happened.

It is important that the parents feel that you are approachable and willing to assist in the care of their child through this difficult period. It is also important to discuss the parent's wishes regarding the extent of your involvement. The teacher's role may vary from merely monitoring the child at school to organising structured and unstructured activities in the classroom.

It is important to understand that the death of a baby to miscarriage, stillbirth or neonatal death is just as difficult as the death of any child or close relative. So it is important not to trivialise the loss by the use of clichés such as:

- "Don't worry you can have another baby, you need to worry about your other children now"
- "At least you already have children"
- "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).

When discussing the death with the parents remember that they have a right to privacy and may not wish to discuss it with you. This is perfectly okay and if this is the case, then ask the parents what they would like for you to do.

### **What you need to know/what to ask the parent(s):**

- Religious beliefs of the family
- What is the name and sex of the baby? Are the comfortable with you using the baby's name? (This is almost universally yes)
- What does the sibling under your care know and how has it been explained to them by their parents. It is important to know this in detail because it is important to keep discussions consistent to avoid confusing the child. Please respect and support the parent's decisions in this area.
- Do the parents want feedback and how would they like this communicated?
- Are the parents happy for you to let other staff at the school know and acknowledge their loss?

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

### **How children react to the death of their baby brother or sister**

All children are different and the way they react will depend in part on their personality and family environment. Children have different understandings of death at different developmental stages. Honesty is the best way we can help children cope with this painful experience.

Three to six year olds often do not understand the finality of death and may see death as temporary and thus may repeatedly ask when their brother or sister is coming home. A child this age may assume he or she is responsible for the death or be fearful that someone else will die. A child whose verbal skills may not allow the discussion of fear or sadness, may have a sudden personality change, experience nightmares or begin wetting the bed.

Six to nine year olds require more detail. They understand the finality of death and they will fear other deaths. Play is a child's primary activity and in it they find a familiar escape. Be careful not to interpret this coping strategy as a lack of concern by the child or that they have adequately dealt with the issue. The child may feel responsible for the baby's death especially if they had previously felt resentment towards the arrival of this new brother or sister.

Nine to twelve year olds may have an almost adult understanding of death. They may show more of their feelings and may find it useful to discuss this with an adult they can trust ie their teacher. They will require more information regarding the circumstances under which their sibling died.

No matter what the age of the child, their belief of being totally protected has changed. During this period of vulnerability the child may turn to the teacher as a source of reassurance and stability.

### **The child, the classroom and the school**

Every child grieves differently and there is not one correct way to deal with the child. Below are some ideas that could be followed in consultation with the parents:

- Let the child know that you are available to discuss any issues that may concern them but try not to single out the grieving child for special privileges or compensation.

- Be aware of changes in the child's normal behaviour and communicate these observations to the parents. You may volunteer to talk to the child about his or her problems, especially if the parents are still dealing with their own grief.
- Be prepared to discuss death at any time. 'Talking time' cannot always be planned and children may use 'show and tell' as an opportunity to show pictures of their dead baby brother or sister.
- Children should not be isolate or insulated from death and this may be an opportunity to expose pupils to death as a natural part of life. Children may be encouraged to share their own experiences with death e.g. loss of a pet or grandparent. This activity should be preceded by private discussion and permission from child and family.
- The child or the class may choose to express their feelings in the form of pictures or stories about the family or event. Encourage this as a way for children to acknowledge the death and also reach out to others.
- When speaking to the child about death, do be willing to listen and discuss their emotions. Do not use euphemisms eg "your baby brother went to sleep" This may result is a child being afraid of going to sleep.

Use simple but honest explanations, following the guidelines given by the child's parents.

The parents may choose to use the newsletter or similar medium to inform the greater school community about their loss.

#### **Grieving is a long-term process:**

The grief process can last for months to years and as children develop, their understanding grows and they might need to 're-work' the death to fit into their new knowledge and awareness of the world. With this in mind, it may be appropriate to inform the next teacher of the child about the situation.

How we grieve and how we are supported in our childhood can affect how we grieve as adults.

#### **Where to go for more information:**

- 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, and school psychologist or guidance officer if you feel the need.
- Self-help groups are available eg Sands Queensland, for children, parents, families and professionals assisting.
- Talk to your colleagues. Mutual support and networking with other teachers and mental health professionals is very important.

## Books

### For Teachers

- For Those Who Live – helping children cope with the death of a brother or sister. Kathy LaTour
- The Seasons of Grief. Helping children grow through loss. Dr Donna Gaffney.

### For Young Children

- Our Baby Died. Jane Warland.
- When Dinosaurs Die. Krasny Brown and March Brown.

### For Older Children

- Am I Still A Sister? Alicia Sims
- Molly's Rosebush. Janice Cohn

For further information please visit

[www.sandsqld.org.au](http://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, teachers, guidance officers, bereaved parents and children of the Stillbirth and Newborn Death Support group.