

Children and Grief



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The grief and experiences that follow the death of a baby are hard for adults to comprehend, so it is little wonder children also have difficulty understanding this complex situation.

When a baby in the family dies, your other children may become a source of great comfort to you. Conversely, you may find they add to your already heightened anxiety in a fragile world that no longer seems to make sense to you.

The range of emotions you will be feeling may leave you confused and thinking that you are failing your living children. Rest assured it won't always be this way. What you are feeling is a natural part of the grieving process.

Raising children is a demanding job at the best of times, but after the death of a baby, even the simplest of things can become exhausting.

Support from friends and family is so valuable at this time, especially to give the children a break from your sadness and to provide you space to experience your distress. Allow friends and grandparents to help with the care of older children by taking them on small outings, feeding and bathing them.

How will children react to the death of a baby?

The death of your baby is probably the first encounter with death your living children have had. It can be difficult to see them trying to make sense of such a significant loss.

Some children worry that they were in some way responsible. Others may start to behave out of character as they try to make sense of their own feelings of grief. Offer your children as much support and guidance as you can through this difficult time.

“After my second daughter Lucy was stillborn, I had almost no respite to grieve, because my then two-year-old Beatrice still needed me to care for her every need. That need was simultaneously overwhelming and my saving grace.”

- Angie

General age-related reactions to death:

Up to age three

Children will be aware that mummy and daddy are sad. They may respond with different eating and sleeping patterns. They may also be more irritable clingier and occasionally regress in toileting.

Three to six

At this stage it is difficult for children to understand the finality of death. They may, however, be interested in the process

of death or how people die. It is not uncommon for them to ask direct questions that parents may find hard to answer. They may repeatedly ask where their sibling is and if he or she is coming home, or in some cases they may even appear unaffected.

Six to nine

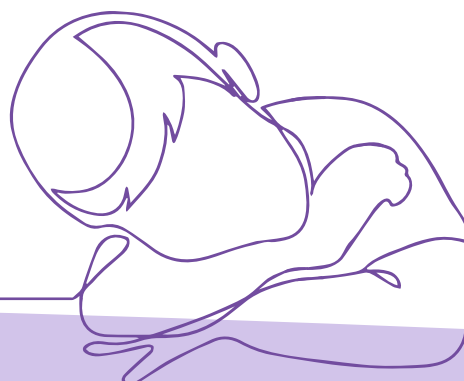
Children generally understand the finality of death and may fear their parents, other siblings or they, themselves, might die. This may be reflected in problems sleeping and needing more physical contact

Nine to twelve

Their understanding is at almost adult level. They will require more information and may need additional emotional support and reassurance.

Teenagers

They will mostly have an adult appreciation of death but may look to their own future and express a desire never to have children. They may need more time to themselves, either alone or with their peers. Sometimes they will revert to childlike needs for extra physical contact.



Some helpful suggestions for explaining the death of a baby to siblings:

- Give simple and age-appropriate explanations.
- Use words such as 'dead' and 'death' and use explanations such as 'their body no longer works'.
- Let them know that being sad and crying is okay, and that it is not their fault.
- Initiate the topic and don't always wait for them to bring it up.
- There are children's picture books available to help start this conversation.
- Explore the other emotions they are feeling such as anger and fear.
- Repeat the facts many times and tell the story in different ways, as children will need many opportunities to try to make sense of things.
- Provide reassurance and lots of physical contact.
- Get children involved with funeral preparations, where appropriate, and any other rituals or remembrance services. For example, ask them to write letters or draw pictures for the baby who has died.



The role of teachers and other caregivers

It is crucial that you let others around you know how you plan to care for your child during this difficult time. Friends, family members, teachers and carers all need to know how you would like them to handle the situation when your child talks or asks questions about their sibling who has died. For example, if you don't talk about heaven at home, it is important to let people know that you do not wish them to discuss this with your child. If you don't feel up to engaging with these caregivers directly you can email or ask a trusted family member or friend to do so on your behalf.

Explaining the death of a baby to subsequent siblings

There is no right or wrong time to tell living children about their sibling who died before they were born. Many families find that if they introduce the concepts around death and their baby early and regularly, their living children grow up knowing and accepting they have a sibling who has died.

Memory making and rituals involving siblings and subsequent children can be beneficial. This can include special birthday rituals, a special space in the home or an ornament on the Christmas tree. Refer to our factsheet Creating Memories for ideas on how to include all of your children in family rituals.

“Try to allow yourself time to grieve. In some respects, I only really started to grieve for Christopher once his brother Daniel had come home from hospital. That’s when it really hit home that I was never going to raise the twins I had expected and loved.”

- Skye

Where to go for more help

Remember that you are not alone in this experience. Many parents find talking with other parents who have had a baby die, like a Red Nose volunteer parent supporter, to be very helpful.

Red Nose Bereavement Support Services We support anyone affected by the loss of a pregnancy, stillbirth or the death of a baby or child.

24/7 Support Line 1300 308 307

support@rednose.org.au

Support Library rednosegriefandloss.org.au



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