

## A child's response to death...

It can be frightening to consider the needs of your grieving child while you are intensely grieving yourself, but the death of a sibling can have a profound impact on a child. Many times, families have created a structure in their lives that includes how to react to death or what happens after death set in place through their religion or personal belief system. These beliefs and rituals can be a great comfort, but you may continue to struggle with understanding your child's responses. So that you can better communicate with your child, it is helpful to know how children typically react to death.



**Infants & Toddlers**—Infants and toddlers generally have no concept of what death is. Children under three are more reactive to your feelings and behavior than they are to a sibling's death. They may exhibit more crankiness, clinginess, or regressions in behaviors such as potty training. It is important to keep your daily routine as normal as you can and offer physical assurances like holding and cuddling.

**Preschoolers**—Preschoolers see death as temporary or reversible. Children from three to five tend to have magical thinking about death, as it is not always portrayed truthfully on television or in movies. They don't understand that death is permanent, but they are very curious about it. Preschoolers tend to ask questions frequently and repeatedly. This is normal behavior, and it is how they learn. They need to hear and use real terms like 'dead' and 'death', but they also need simplicity in your answers to the never ending question of 'why?' They may react to your responses by showing little concern about the situation, or they may need to talk repetitively about the death. Preschool children may also regress in their behavior or begin having separation issues. Respond to their

needs by explaining each aspect of the situation. Not only do they need to know the truth, they also need physical reassurances such as hugging and holding.

**Ages 6 to 9**—Younger elementary school children are beginning to understand death is final. They realize that they can die, as well as people they love, and may begin to fear death. Their reactions can include crying, anxiety, or an unwillingness to talk about the death. Because they are just beginning their development of the concept of death and dying, they rely on your compassion and reassurance to let them know they are all right. Allow them to talk, draw, or tell stories about the baby.



**Ages 9 to 12**—Death to tweens is very personal and realistic. They can differentiate between alive and dead, and understand that death is forever. Children this age will look for permission to show feelings and participate in honoring the baby. In response to the death, they may feel denial, guilt, or anger. They may also begin to show signs of separation anxiety, and their performance at school may decline. Remember that their feelings are important and need to be validated to promote healthy grieving. Give honest and compassionate answers to reassure it is all right to feel the way they do. Even older kids need assurance that you are available and going through this with them.

**Teenagers**—Teenagers have more adult thought processes and are able to think abstractly and understand the implications of death. Teenagers have feelings of immortality, yet are able to realize the fragility of life. When confronted with death, they may become preoccupied with dying, or may exhibit risk-taking behavior. Encouraging communication or lovingly confronting your child about their feelings may help their grieving process. Many times you can look to a trusted friend for your child to confide in.

## What to expect...

General expressions of grief can include:

**Denial**—Refusing to accept death is normal, and will lessen in time.

**Sadness**—Children feel sadness and loneliness, but experience it in shorter periods of time. It may be hard for them to understand or verbalize how they are feeling.

**Anxiety**—The family may be in turmoil if the death was sudden. Some factors that contribute to worry and fear can include parental relations, how the family deals with grief, or how the family deals with each other during difficult times.

**Bodily Distress or Behavior Problems**—Children may have headaches, problems sleeping, stomachaches or other repeated illnesses. They may also show unusual anger, hostility, or stubbornness. Children may behave inappropriately, take part in attention seeking behaviors, or believe that they deserve to be punished. Talking out their feelings will help reduce these symptoms of grief. Having an outlet may be helpful.

**Anger or Blame**—Children may be angry with the people caring for the mother or baby, and may feel the baby should have been saved. Unexpressed anger and hostility may be directed at people not even involved in the death, or may come without warning. Children may blame and be angry with parents, hospital professionals, or even God.

**Guilt**—Children may feel guilty and think they should have died instead of their sibling. Extreme guilt may lead to seeking punishment or thoughts of suicide.

**Depression**—Children who are depressed generally have an extreme change from their normal behavior. They may be withdrawn, tired, or they may have dramatic changes in their appetite and sleep routines. If depression persists, professional counseling should be encouraged.

**Indifference**—Some children prefer a certain detachment from family grief. Remember, every child is unique in how they express their grief.

## Important things to remember...

**1. Children want to share their experience of grief with adults.** Your child's love for the baby may be very special. They usually want to share their feelings; they do not want to be told how to feel. Open-ended questions can help you talk and listen to what your child feels. When talking about the baby you can say things such as "How does that make you feel?" or "What would you like to do for the baby?"

**2. Never deceive your child to protect them. Children need honesty.** In general, children find ways to cope with sad news. It is important to refrain from using clichés, half-truths, and fairy tales that cannot explain the mystery of death. Lying or dismissing the topic, leaves too much to a child's imagination and may teach that we do not have to be honest when dealing with others. Unhealthy explanations can also create fear, doubt, or anger. Remember, children think literally. Using phrases like "we lost the baby," "the baby is sleeping with God," "the baby went on a long trip," or "the baby is watching over you now" can be confusing because of the literal meaning of the phrases. Using a phrase like "The baby died. That means her heart stopped beating and her body doesn't work anymore. She is not with us like she used to be, but we will always remember and love her very much." explains literally what happened and how you feel about it. Young children especially need simple, honest explanations.

**3. Allow your child to ask questions.** Younger children tend to repeat the same question, perhaps to assure themselves that the story is still the same. Each time you repeat the story or circumstance honestly, you are allowing the child to understand more deeply. Because you, too, are grieving, you may feel frustrated by this process. Children learn how to cope with their grief from your feelings, actions, and responses to their questions. Do your best to be patient and ask for help if you need it.

**4. Children want to be heard and understood.** Each child's thoughts and feelings are important and must be treated as such. Children are very sensitive to energy levels, moods, tones of voices, and choices of words. Remember to actively listen, make eye contact and respond to your child without judgment.

**5. We don't grieve in steps or stages.** Don't expect your child to grieve in an orderly fashion. They generally grieve in shorter bursts, with a wide

range of emotions and reactions. They cannot sustain grief in the same way as adults. They grieve, and then move away from the pain. Each child is different and special, even those in the same family.

**6. We experience grief as a process, not an event.** The healing process happens over time. A grieving child is unable to hurry through their emotions and get over it. Just as you will miss the baby on special occasions like birthdays and holidays, so will your child. If they cannot communicate how they feel verbally, it is possible they will express it in their behavior.

**7. Include children in farewell rituals and/or funeral as appropriate for their age.** You may worry and/or wonder if it will be too hard on your children, but it can be an important step in their future healing. Children who are not allowed to participate in goodbye rituals may end up more confused about what has happened.

**8. Help children create or buy mementos of the baby.** It will make them feel special as well as keep the baby's memory alive. Consider a special piece of jewelry, photo album, or memory box.

## When to seek extra support...

Additional help can come from extended family, close friends, teachers, counselors, social workers, therapists, etc. The following behaviors can be indicators that your child needs more help in finding healthy ways to grieve. You may want to consider seeking more help if you have any serious concerns, or if your child...

- ...pretends nothing ever happened*
- ...develops a fear of school or school work*
- ...dramatically declines*
- ...threatens suicide*
- ...frequently panics or shows excessive anxiety*
- ...physically assaults other people or is cruel to animals*
- ...behaves poorly with family members*
- ...becomes involved with drugs or alcohol*
- ...begins committing serious socially delinquent acts*
- ...is unwilling or unable to socialize with other children*



## Children's Grief

*A brief reference for those supporting a child whose sibling has died through early pregnancy loss, stillbirth, or in the first few months of life*