

Explaining miscarriage or stillbirth to young children

When a new baby is expected in a family, most young children will be looking forward to the birth as much as everyone else. Having to explain the loss of an expected baby brother or sister is an incredibly hard thing to do. When deep in your own grief, it might feel just too much to have to start and think about what to say to a toddler or young child. This information sheet explains how to answer questions from young children and suggests words to use that will help them to understand what has happened. Children have a much greater capacity to deal with the truth than most adults realise; it is the unsaid and the untruthful that they struggle with.

Why do I need to say anything, my children are very young?

Children are all individuals and each will react to what you are about to tell them in their own way. Some will be upset, others will carry on as if nothing has happened, but all will be affected to some degree. An explanation will enable them to start to try to make some sense of the situation. Without this, young children may start to feel anxious and insecure, unsure of what is going on and what is the cause. What they are not told they often make up, their imaginings being harder for adults to manage than a sad reality. This is when children can start to blame themselves by believing in some way they must be responsible for what has happened.

A child may not fully understand what has happened but they will certainly have picked up on your distress and be very aware that things are "not right". A simple explanation as to why you are upset will reassure that you are OK but feeling very sad because that is how people are when something upsetting happens.

Children are often involved in preparations for the new baby and along with the rest of the family may have talked about things they are going to do with their new baby brother or sister. They therefore need to understand why this is not going to happen to help them cope with their own, and everyone else's disappointment. Even children who have appeared ambivalent about a new baby will still have had some expectations around being a big brother or sister.

When should I tell them?

It may feel unprotective, but children need to hear the news as soon as possible. The longer you leave it the greater the likelihood that they will overhear a conversation or find out in some other inappropriate way. Children are naturally curious and learn by asking questions. If a child is asking a question, it is usually because they need to hear, and are ready to hear, the answer.

How much should I say

If you lost your baby very early on in your pregnancy, other children may not be aware that a baby was on the way. However, they will be aware that something is not right and that you are behaving differently. Young children have a tendency to think that they must be the cause, even when nothing has been said or done to imply this. Some appropriate words to explain your upset will reassure them that they are not the reason for it.

Try to use simple words appropriate for your child's age and understanding. It is important to use the real words such as "dead". Euphemisms including "lost" or "gone to sleep" may appear kinder but for a child can cause complication and confusion as they take them literally.

Every child is different and some will need more information than others. How much you say will be influenced by your child's stage of development, personality and temperament. You know your child better than anyone and are therefore the best judge as to how much to say.

Give just enough information to deal with the question asked. When a child is ready to hear more, they will ask another question. There is a fine line between being honest and overloading a child with information they do not want or need. The following words are only suggestions to help you answer the question “*What happened?*”.

Initially this may be all you need to say. “*I have some very sad news to tell you. Your little baby brother was not as strong and healthy as we thought he was and unfortunately he has died.*”

Young children will not necessarily understand what being dead means. “*Being dead means that he isn’t breathing, his heart has stopped and his body has stopped working. We are feeling very sad because we are going to miss him very much.*”

On hearing the news young children will need reassurance. “*It is very unusual for this to happen but sadly it sometimes does. When you were inside mummy’s tummy you were fine.*”

Some children, because they are older, or are just more curious, might ask more questions. There is no timescale for this and it may be days, weeks, or months after the baby has died. The following are just suggestions to give you ideas for words that feel right for you and your children.

Agree beforehand what you are going to say so that children hear the same explanation from all adults. A child’s reactions on hearing the news that their expected baby brother or sister has died will probably be the same regardless of at what stage of the pregnancy it happened. The term “born too early” may feel easier to use than an adult word such as “miscarriage”; it is up to you.

A possible explanation for a miscarriage

“*Sometimes babies are born too soon because there is something wrong with them and they have not grown properly when inside their Mummy’s tummies. Because they are not ready to be born, and are so very very tiny, they cannot live. Sadly, this is what happened to our baby. We don’t always know why this happens and we wish very much that it had not happened to ours.*”

The Miscarriage Association has other suggestions in their leaflet “Talking To Children About Miscarriage.”

Words that might help you to talk to a child about a Stillbirth

A very few babies sadly die before they are born while still inside their mummy’s tummy.

While still in Mummy’s tummy the baby’s body was not growing properly. There was something wrong with the baby and this meant that he died before he was born which is very sad.

This means that the baby will not be coming home to live with us or grow up to be big like you. How very lucky we are to have you.

Words that might help you to prepare a child for an Expected Stillbirth

I have some sad news to tell you. You know that we are expecting your baby brother/sister to be born in July. When mummy went to see the doctor today they took a special photograph (scan) of the baby because they thought that there might be something wrong. When they looked at the photograph (scan), they could not see his heart beating. This is because it had stopped working. Your heart needs to work to stay alive so the doctor knew that he had died inside Mummy’s tummy. This means that when he is born he will be dead. This is a very sad thing to happen and we wish very much that he was still alive.

We will still give the baby a name, would you like to help choose one? We will say a special goodbye (have a special service a bit like a funeral) after is born.

How can I help my child

Children need reassurance

Their sense of security may be shaken by what has happened and this can make children feel anxious. They may need extra cuddles or resort to soothing behaviours, such as thumb sucking, more than usual .

Try to keep to your usual routines as much as possible. Daily routines are probably disrupted and familiar people are behaving in unusual ways. Young children will find this unsettling and disturbing. Sticking to what you usually do will help to give a child a sense of safety and everything being OK.

Maintaining your usual levels of discipline will help children to feel secure,

Do tell any adults your child comes into contact with about what has happened. This will help them to understand if your child is behaving out of character and be ready to respond.

Adults act as a role model so it is helpful if everyone can take the same approach. Whether at home, in day care, or at school, children need an accepting and supportive environment where they feel safe to ask questions and share feelings. If the adults around them can express their emotions, a child will know it is OK to do the same.

Encourage and help them to express how they are feeling. Very young children use play to help them understand what has happened. Messy painting or drawing can help a child who is struggling to express themselves with words. Children of all ages enjoy books. Suggestions are given below for books to share that may help open up conversations and offer reassurance.

Resources

Other CBUK information sheets you may find helpful:

Death of a baby – a particular kind of grief
Explaining to young children that someone has died
Supporting bereaved children under 5 years of age

Books to read with children

All Shining in the Spring by Siobhan Parkinson

Matthew is looking forward to the new baby but there is bad news – the baby is not growing properly and will not live after it is born.

We were gonna have a baby, but we had an angel instead by Pat Schwiebert

For age 2 upwards. Very simple with few words. A good one for any situation

Goodbye Baby – Cameron’s Story by Gillian Griffiths

Cameron can not understand why his baby brother died and he gets very angry. He creates a special scrapbook so that he will not forget his baby brother. Written by the author to help her 3 year old son understand what a miscarriage is.

Other organisations

SANDS www.uk-sands.org Tel: 020 7436 5881 miscarriage, stillbirth and neonatal death charity

Supporting children when a baby has died published by SANDS

Booklet mainly for parents and other family members includes how to help and what to say to young children and teenagers.

The Miscarriage Association www.miscarriageassociation.org.uk

