

When a newborn dies- explaining 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 death 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 leaflet 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?

Children are naturally curious and learn by asking questions and watching others' responses. If a child is asking a question, it is usually because he/she needs to hear, and is ready to hear, the answer. 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, become confused, or find out in some other inappropriate way.

How much should I say?

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. Do not be surprised if you are repeatedly asked the same question. This is what children do to try to make some sense of what has happened.

Young children will be aware that something is not right and that you are behaving differently. At this age, they have a tendency to think that they might be the cause of your distress, even when nothing has been said or done to imply this. Some appropriate words to explain your upset will reassure them. *"Mummy is crying because I am feeling very sad that your baby brother has died. It is what people do when someone they love dies. I loved your baby brother and wish that he had been able to live. But I still love you just as much and always will. I am very glad that I have you."*

When explaining what has happened, 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 will take the meaning literally.

Give just enough information to deal with any questions asked.

When children are 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 and sadly he has died. Being dead means that he isn't breathing, his heart has stopped and his body has stopped working. Because he is dead, he cannot feel anything and he is not in any pain. We are feeling very sad because we are going to miss him very much. It is very unusual for this to happen but it sometimes does.*"

Some children, because they are older, or are just more aware, might ask questions that indicate they need more information around what happened. 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. Siblings who visited a baby brother or sister on a neonatal ward/special care unit may have heightened awareness and more questions because of what they saw, or overheard, in the hospital.

Words you may wish to use with children who need more information.

"Sometimes babies are born with an illness, or something wrong with their body, that is so serious that they die very soon after they are born.

The doctors might be able see there is something wrong on a special machine that takes a photograph of the baby before it is born. This is called a scan. Not all problems can be seen this way and sometimes no one realises that there is something wrong. This is what happened to your little brother.

(Sometimes babies are born too soon. Because they are not ready to be born and are so very very tiny, they cannot live. Their heart and lungs are too small to work properly. This is what happened to your baby brother.)

Sadly, you got to know him for only a very short time but we will all remember him. I thought that his nose looked just like yours and he definitely liked your present of the bunny rabbit."

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 young children

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.

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. Suitable for older children, age 8 upwards.

Other organisations

SANDS www.uk-sands.org Tel: 020 7436 5881 miscarriage, stillbirth or 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.