

THE FAMILY; SHARING THE EXPERIENCE

The whole family has been preparing for the baby's birth and it is the whole family that experiences the baby's death. These few days will be the only time you will have together and so it is important that family members are encouraged to see and hold your baby and family photographs are taken.

You will also need time to be alone with your partner to make the necessary arrangements and to discuss your feelings with each other.

You may have already arranged a nursery or a special place for the baby: a place filled with toys and clothes. Family and friends may offer to put these away before you get home, but this is a task you should save for yourself, when you are ready for it. There is no 'right' time for doing this – you alone will know when.

Telling your Children

Many parents worry about what to tell their children and how to help them when their baby brother or sister dies.

Children should be told the news as soon as possible, otherwise they may feel excluded and rejected; there is always the possibility that they will hear from somebody else. Their imagination of what is being kept from them can be far worse than the reality.

Try to give a clear, simple explanation for the baby's death in a way that is appropriate to the child's age; even young children can understand some aspects of death. You don't have to give all the details at once – they will ask more questions in their own time.

It helps children if you are open and honest. That includes saying, 'I don't know' when that is the honest answer to one of their questions. If children discover that they have been told something that is untrue, they become confused.

It is better not to say that God wanted the baby for Himself, as the child may think that God will want them or you too. To say "the baby has gone to sleep" can cause children to fear sleep.

Children don't always show their feelings immediately. It may take them a while to express their feelings, and they may still be talking about the baby and about what happened months or even years later.

Involving your Children

It is particularly important that your children come to see you in hospital and assure themselves that you are all right. They may have been worried about you – all children sense sadness and tension, and they usually know when something is wrong. It helps your children if you involve them in everything that is happening, and this includes bringing them to see their brother or sister. This may be a difficult decision for you but it will help them understand what has happened.

Every family is different. The choice of how you involve your children when your baby dies is yours alone, but the following are some points for you to consider:

- Children of all ages should be given the choice to see or hold the baby if they want to.
- If the child does not want to see the baby, ask if he or she would like to see a photograph.
- Children who have spent time with their baby brother or sister will have real memories to help them through their grief.
- Your child might have a toy or gift to give to the baby; this helps them to feel part of what is happening.
- Children can help pick or buy flowers for the baby's funeral.
- Older children may like to take an active part in the funeral by participating in readings, music and poetry.
- If you have children at school, it is important to remember to inform the teacher/school what has happened. If you do not feel up to this right now, you could ask a relative or friend to do so.
- A leaflet for Teachers is included in A Little Lifetime Pack which might be helpful to the Teacher/School.

GRIEF OF THE FAMILY

Children and Grief

Children's reaction to death depends on their age and stage of development. Even very young children often understand much more than adults may realise. They will be aware of your sadness and distress even if you try to hide it. Older children will have a clearer understanding of what death means and their experience of grief is similar to that of an adult. It is important for parents to realise that sometimes their own grief leaves them unable to help and support their children. It may help them to talk to a relative or friend.

- Many children feel guilty that their brother's or sister's death must somehow have been their fault. Sometimes children don't say that they feel responsible but they may become very anxious and unhappy. It's hard for them to explain the death to themselves in any other way. They may remember saying at some time, "I don't want this baby", or "I wish the baby would go away". They need to know that thoughts like these cannot cause a baby's death. They may need a lot of reassurance about this.
- It will help if you can talk to them about why your baby died, and if there is no known reason, explain this honestly.
- Children need reassurance that they are not going to die, and that their normal, everyday life can go on. Some think that death may be infectious or 'catching'

and become very fearful, especially if they get something like a cold or a stomach upset.

- Children can switch their feelings on and off. They can be sad one minute and happy the next – but that doesn't mean their feelings are not genuine or just as intense as yours.
- Children need to be able to show their feelings when **they** want to, talk when **they** feel like it; ask questions, when the questions come into their heads. They will also expect to get answers. Talking when *you* think there is a need to talk does not usually work so well.
- Older children will sometimes be reluctant to talk about the baby. They can understand the full extent of the death of their brother or sister and they will be going through their own grief. They may not want to upset their parents by talking about the baby. It is good for them to express their feelings and sometimes they may prefer to talk to a close relative or friend.
- Some children want to care for you as well as be cared for. Try to accept their love and support without asking them to be brave or grown up.
- Children need to understand how *you* are feeling (sad, upset, angry, irritable) and why. They need to know that you loved the baby, that you are missing the baby, and that the baby won't come back. They also need to know that you love them, and that you are not sad, upset, angry or irritable because of them.
- Many parents find it extremely hard to support and care for their children while they are feeling so low and in need of support themselves. Grandparents, aunts and uncles, and family friends can all help.
- It's important to talk to your child's teacher. It can help if children have the chance to talk in school about what has happened, and also if other children are helped to understand. There may be times when your child needs someone to turn to at school, such as a close friend or teacher.
- Sometimes parents don't get the chance or perhaps decide not to bring their other children to see the baby. These children will still have feelings of grief and they may feel angry because they were not included. Try to explain why it was not possible for them to see the baby, and help them express their feelings.
- Even after some time has passed you may help your child to make some memories. You could do something special together as a way of remembering. Perhaps you could both make up an album of photographs, flowers, cards, or drawings that your child has done. You could help them plant a tree or some flowers for the baby. Including them in this way can help them in their grief.

GRANDPARENTS

If you are a grandparent of a baby who dies, you will be grieving too – not only for the grandchild that you will never be able to play with and watch grow, but also for your own child. Most parents want to protect their children. If you could, you would probably like to take away the suffering that your child is feeling. It will be difficult for you to see your child being so upset about the death of their baby and you may want to do everything possible to help ease the pain.

We have learned more about the grieving process in the last few years and you may find that things have changed a lot, especially if you or someone close to you experienced the death of a baby many years ago. Nowadays parents, grandparents and members of the extended family all get a chance to see and hold the baby that has died. In cases where the baby is kept in a special care baby unit, grandparents are encouraged to see the baby there. Being part of the baby's life, no matter how short it may be, is very important. Let the parents know that you are there for them if they need any help. Knowing that you are there to support them in any way will mean a lot to them at this time.

Talking about the baby is an important part of the grieving process and although it may be painful for you, it will mean a lot to the parents. In the years to come always remember to count the grandchild who has died when talking about the number of grandchildren you have. Remember the baby's birthday or anniversary just as you would if the child had lived. A card or a few words can mean a lot. Be aware that family occasions such as Christenings may be difficult for the parents of the baby that has died. Although you may feel helpless, your support will be appreciated now and in the future. If you have experienced the death of one of your own children, and now the death of your grandchild is bringing back painful memories, you can contact us (ISANDS 01-8726996) for support. We may be able to help you trace information about your baby, where he or she may be buried (if not known) or register your baby on the stillbirth register.

ISANDS have a leaflet for parents whose baby died a long time ago. If you would like a copy please call 01 8726996.