

How to support a child through the loss of a baby.

The loss of a hoped for child can be devastating and overwhelming for all involved and no less so for a big brother or sister that was eagerly awaiting the arrival of a new family member. Below is some information about how to help support children through this time.

Many parents feel they don't know where to start when explaining what has happened around a stillbirth or death to children. We acknowledge it can be a very difficult conversation to have and can feel very overwhelming, children are very perceptive and will usually know that something has changed in the mood or atmosphere; so here is some advice for that time;

- A quiet, small and familiar space.
- Having one or more familiar adults present that can provide clarification, love, support, cuddles or step in if one person gets too upset.
- Lots of reassurance, cuddles and love.
- Open, age appropriate and honest communication about the situation and what happened, try to keep the information simple and repetitive, as to not confuse children.
- Avoid using words like sleeping/ lost/ gone/ these can cause confusion and anxiety in children as they associate these words with other things and may become frightened by them long-term.
- Although it might be hard, try to use words and phrases like "our baby has died", which means her heart is no longer beating and he/she does not have any pain. Factual information can be a helpful way to explain to children what has happened.
- It can be helpful or important for some families for the sibling/s to meet a baby that has passed. Ultimately it is your decision as parents as to whether this is right or wrong for your family but try to be led by your children if possible. Try and explain to your children beforehand what will happen so they know what to expect. Sometimes using a picture of your child that has passed as a starting place might feel more comfortable for you. Siblings can also be included in memory creation e.g. photographs, these photographs might be something long term that helps a sibling feel connected to their brother/sister.
- Don't be afraid to show your emotions in front of your child, a lot of parents worry that this will upset their child but it actually helps them to see what healthy grieving looks like. Explain to them that when you are sad, e.g. crying and being upset is a normal thing and you are sad and that's because our baby has died. O'Leary and Gaziano (2011) recognize that when parents are present to model, acknowledge and legitimize grief for bereaved siblings it can lead to greater understanding and empathy growth.
- Talk to your children about your baby that has passed. Say their name, what you had hoped for, for their dreams and future by talking about them you will give your child the confidence and permission to also share their thoughts and feelings. Webb (2010) explains that denial, anger, guilt, sadness and longing are felt by young and old alike in response to the death of a loved one.

Keeping the memory alive of a baby that has passed can be an important part of the grieving process for all family members. Some things that might help your child feel connected are visiting your child's grave or resting place and placing flowers or presents on special days. Planting seeds or flowers and watching them grow. Special Christmas decorations; just for your baby or mementos at times of the year, so they are included in family rituals. Visiting a special place and spending time to talk about your baby that has passed. The creation of meaningful memories has been found to be important in helping siblings in the grief process (Bartellas & Van Aerde, 2003).

Remember you are doing your best and there are no right or wrongs to follow during this time of grieving. The Mater Mothers Bereavement Team is always here to support you and your family during this time with resources and information around this topic.

