

# ABOUT THE OTHER CHILDREN



## SHROPSHIRE

Supporting anyone  
affected by the death of a  
baby

Helpline No: 07772 217439

[www.shropshiresands.co.uk](http://www.shropshiresands.co.uk)

Charity Registration No: 299679

Parents are often anxious about how their children will be affected by their baby's death. As each family is different it is not possible to tell you exactly what to do.

What we have tried to do is to share some of our thoughts about what can be a help to your child after the baby's death.

Children of different ages perceive death in different ways. The quality and degree of their understanding may be quite unrelated to age. Sometimes it will be easier to explain the death to a small child. Depending on the child's past experience each child will have an individual way of coping.

It is best if parents can be open and honest with their children. When children sense that something is being hidden or kept back, the 'something' can become exaggerated in their minds and become far worse than it actually is. For example, when some children sense that a tragedy has happened in their family they assume that it is the mother who is in danger.

Children do not need very complicated explanations; simple ideas like 'the baby died because she didn't grow properly. Mummy and Daddy are very sad, but will feel less sad as time goes on', often will suffice. Allow them to ask questions when they feel ready. Again keep answers simple and honest. Explanations like 'Jesus was lonely, so He took the baby to keep Him company', 'Baby is being looked after by the hospital', may have unexpected and frightening implications to the child about what will happen next time Jesus is lonely or the child is ill.

Some parents feel unable to mention the baby at all on their return from the hospital.

They go in to have the baby and come home empty handed, and don't, because of their emotional distress, feel able to explain why.

This can lead to the child suppressing his curiosity, picking up the cue that there are secrets it is dangerous or forbidden to talk about. This can make the child very afraid without being able to express his fear, except possibly by clinging to his mother.

Try to talk to your children about the baby that died.

Where possible include the children, if you wish your children to see your dead baby please discuss the matter with the staff. There is no reason why they should not see and even hold their dead brother or sister, attend the funeral, and visit the grave or garden of remembrance. Provided this can be presented as normal after a death has occurred, children usually take things in their stride. If parents feel worried about how they themselves will react they should ask someone to help.

After their baby dies some parents feel that the world is unsafe and that something terrible may happen to their other children; this may lead to them becoming over protective. It is also common to react by resenting their living children's demands when they feel the need to give time to thinking about their dead baby.

These reactions of over protectiveness and resentment can be bewildering and upsetting to the children. Sometimes children may take on an 'ill role' as that brings out the over protectiveness which is less painful than the rejection.

This can reinforce a parent's belief that the world is unsafe and you can find yourself visiting your G.P. frequently. If you are worried about this discuss it with your Health Visitor or G.P.

Most children, however young they may be, feel guilty after the baby dies, and blame themselves, thinking that jealous, angry thoughts or actions could have killed the baby. This normal guilt feeling is usually present in the parents as well. It is important that parents bring the matter up by saying something like, 'It was nobody's fault', and indicating that guilt is quite normal, and that they too have it, even though they were not responsible.

Children will grieve in their own way and their own pace. Some may not show their grief until they feel their parents are better. However, it is healthier if they can express their grief quite soon after the baby dies. If a child only starts showing her distress many months after the death, parents can be confused as to the cause. Often a talk about what happened, allowing the child to use toys to play out the events can make all concerned to feel more in control. Children will often use toys in play to help themselves work through their bewilderment and distress. The way they do this can be upsetting to adults who are not usually as blunt over death as children can be. Children, like adults may use jokes or giggling to hide or avoid an overwhelming anxiety or sadness on hearing of their baby brother's or sister's death. This can be bewildering to parents, who are not expecting such a reaction.

Because the child may see it as commonplace to have a baby die in the family, children can upset adults by asking pregnant women or couples with small babies when their baby is going to die. This can be their way of understanding their sadness and muddle about why babies die. You can help your child by a discussion, which enables them to see that not all small babies die.

If your child is at school it is important that the school knows of the tragedy that has occurred. Very often your child's concentration at school will be affected. They may have a shortened attention span, and their work may suffer. It is usually assumed that their friends will be understanding. However, some children have found themselves being jeered at in the playground because of a baby's death. This adds to their distress, but is something they do not always feel able to discuss at home because it may increase your distress. You can give them an opening by asking them about how they are managing at school, and finding out who is being supportive, and who is being unpleasant. You can help them to understand that it is often fear that something as frightening may happen to them that leads children to behave in that way.

The next pregnancy can be a very anxious time for your child. Their experience will have taught them that in their family, pregnancy can end in death. It is not uncommon for children to start bedwetting and soiling again.

Parents cannot promise that everything will be alright, they can explain that not all babies die, and they too are anxious about the outcome. Often the bedwetting will disappear after the safe delivery of the next child.

Often parents are surprised by their child's reaction when the next baby is born. Many become over responsible towards the baby, and may be extremely anxious if the baby becomes ill. This is because some children do not trust the next baby to stay alive. Often these reactions develop because children feel their feelings of jealousy are so destructive that they may have killed the last baby. By talking about it you can help them to learn to tolerate their jealousy by understanding that these are normal feelings.

We are grateful to Hazelanne Lewis for writing this leaflet for other bereaved parents.