



Siblings & Grief

Pregnancy and infant loss can be devastating and incredibly difficult for a child to process. Siblings, often referred to as "forgotten mourners," may feel lost amid the grief and mourning. They may feel the need to be strong for their parents and not show their own emotions. Parents who are consumed with their own grief may inadvertently overlook the needs of their other children. It is important for parents to speak openly and honestly with their children and not try to shield them from the reality of death; this may be more harmful in the long run.

Children are inherently observant and acutely aware of distress within the family. It is important to inform them of why adults may be behaving differently. It is ok to share your tears, grief, and pain with your children, so they feel comfortable expressing their own feelings. Consider the age and developmental factors when discussing pregnancy loss and infant death with siblings. Do not assume that very young children are unaffected by the tragedy and do not need support. It is important to provide them with the emotional tools they need to cope with the loss.

Explaining the death of an infant to a child can be an incredibly difficult conversation, especially since you may be having a tough time with the finality of death yourself. It's important to use correct language such as "dead", "death", and "died" to describe the baby's passing. Avoid using phrases such as "the baby is sleeping", as this can cause confusion and imply the baby may wake up in the future.

It can be difficult for children to understand what death means. To help explain, we can use simple metaphors such as saying that death is like the dying leaves on a tree in the winter, or like a beloved pet that has passed away. It may be necessary to explain and repeat these concepts multiple times to ensure that the child understands, gearing explanations towards your child's developmental level.

The death of an infant can be particularly devastating for siblings. Children may feel guilt and blame themselves for the loss, believing they did something to cause the death. Let your child know that they did nothing wrong, and that the death was not their fault. They may also be fearful that they might also die. Give reassurance that your child is safe and ensure they have a safe space to express their emotions.

Your children may suddenly begin asking questions about death weeks, months, or even years later. These questions can come at an unexpected time and place, making it difficult for you and your partner to respond. It is important to be honest and open in your communication with your child about the death of their sibling. Even though it can be hard to answer their questions, doing so will help them process their emotions.

Siblings may experience a wide range of emotions, including guilt, sadness, confusion, fear, or anger. They may show these emotions through various behaviors, such as fighting, acting out, or being disobedient. Alternatively, they may become withdrawn and quiet. It is important to allow siblings to express their emotions and provide them with the support they need. Play activities can be extremely helpful in enabling siblings to express their emotions. Encourage children to draw or paint pictures to express themselves and work through their feelings.

Children of all ages grieve differently, and they may not follow a specific timeline. For example, older siblings can feel especially overwhelmed, as they may be expected to take on more responsibility in the household. They may exhibit signs of depression which can include difficulty concentrating, poor grades in school, and/or withdrawal from friends. Provide a judgment-free space for children to talk about their feelings and experiences.

It can be helpful to enlist the support of other family members in the child's life, especially when you don't have the energy or emotional capacity to provide the support they need. Grief counseling and support groups specifically for children can also be beneficial to help the child process and cope with their loss.



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