

The Grief of Children After Stillbirth:

For Families, Teachers, Caregivers and Friends

Explaining death to a child can be a very difficult, sensitive and painful process. This task becomes even more difficult and painful and demands more sensitivity when the parents, relatives, teachers or caretakers are grieving themselves. However, in a time of crisis such as this, adults must function as “role models and helpers to the bereaved children in their care.” (Wolfelt)

All children will be affected in some way by the death of a much-loved, much-wanted baby. Children, especially very young children unfamiliar with the concept of death, need honest explanations and strong expressions of love from the significant people in their lives to maintain a sense of security and identity in a time of crisis such as this. At the same time, grieving children must also be allowed to express their grief in whatever way seems natural to them.

Young children often do not know how to verbalize or express their feelings when death occurs. They may hold back these emotions or reactions because they find them too overwhelming or because they don't really understand the finality of death. As a result, some children appear unaffected by the loss and may show their reaction by acting out their feelings in negative ways in their play or other activities. They may even act out the events surrounding the death. However, it is very important to remember that children do grieve, often very deeply, regardless of their ability or inability to express the emotions they are feeling. Experts also say that children at different ages have differing capacities to understand death, but most agree that before the ages of nine and ten, children do not usually understand that death is permanent. Adults need to realize this and tailor their explanations accordingly.

Because adults have problems dealing with the reality of death themselves, they may assume that children cannot cope with such an experience. Many adults think they are protecting children by leaving them out of discussions and rituals associated with the loss. However, when the normal grief process is denied them, children often feel anxious, bewildered and alone. When they are left without answers to their questions, “their fears and fantasies may (sometimes) become more upsetting than the truth.” (Cohn) Such a response or lack of response on the part of adults forces children to seek their own often incorrect and inadequate answers at a time when they are most in need of help and reassurance from the adults around them whom they trust.

The reaction of each individual, whether child or adult, to the death of someone close can vary greatly. Therefore, it follows that each child's reaction to the death is also unique. However, bereavement experts have noted that there are certain common emotions usually expressed in the grief process of all, including children: FEAR, ANGER, GUILT and SADNESS.

Children, regardless of their age, feel these same emotions in varying degrees. When confronted with death, the basic reactions of children are not very different from those of the adults around them — whether these adults are parents, grandparents, extended family, friends or professional caregivers. The key difference between the grief reactions of adults and children are the intensity and manner of expression.

After death, life is not the same as most people wish it were, but life is the way it is now and this is the situation that will have to be dealt with. “Between the way things used to be and the way they are now... (exists) a void that (can't) be crossed.” (Moffatt)

Many lives are altered by a baby's death, but even after such a tragic loss healing can occur. "It is possible to transcend the awfulness of the death by choosing memorial services and other personal rituals that celebrate memory of the baby, while not denying the physical finality of death." (Horchler) Children must be allowed to be part of this process and they need to know that the people who are important to them care about them no matter what they're feeling. (Rogers and Sharapan)

Some Common Reactions of Children to Death and Loss

- *Anxiety and Fear.* After the death of someone close, children may experience anxious or fearful moments. They may fear that they themselves or someone close to them will die, or worry there is something wrong with them or that their bodies will cease to work. Children may cling to parents or other adults around them and seek frequent expressions of love or affirmation.
- *Anger.* Children may express anger at the baby for dying or at God for not letting the baby live. Children, especially young children, are mostly concerned with their own needs and often show anger when they feel these needs might not be met. Children need to know that it is ok to show anger as long as it is not hurtful to others.
- *Guilt.* In some cases, surviving siblings may feel guilt because of angry thoughts or feelings of resentment they may have had toward the baby. They may resent all the attention focused on the baby during pregnancy or after the death. Surviving children may also feel guilty about not behaving "better" in some way, or that something they did caused harm to the baby or may even have caused the death. A child may even feel guilty about being alive when the baby is dead, and may sense that parents also may feel guilty about this. Children need to know that even if they had angry thoughts or feelings about the baby, these did not cause the death.
- *Regression.* After a death, young children may revert to earlier behavior patterns, such as bed-wetting, taking a bottle, thumb-sucking, demanding to sleep with the parents or fearing to be left alone. In most cases, these behavioral patterns are short-term and the child usually moves on with the help and understanding of loving adults.
- *Physical Symptoms.* After the death, children may express various physical complaints such as headaches or stomachaches, sleeping and eating habits may change or they may experience bad dreams.
- *Shock.* Sometimes children may not believe that a death really happened and may act as though it had not, and some children may appear not to show any emotion at all. Children sometimes react this way because they cannot grasp the concept of death. Death is a totally unfamiliar concept to most children.
- *Sadness.* In some cases, grieving children may show a decrease in activity—becoming too quiet or introspective, expressing feelings of sadness, daydreaming or crying a lot without being able to explain why.