

Sibling Grief

Collette Christoffers, RN
March of Dimes
NICU Family Support





**About one
in eight
infants is
born
preterm**

Infant Mortality

In the United States in 2006, 28,509 infants died before reaching their first birthday, an infant mortality rate of 6.7 per 1,000 live births.

National Center for Health Statistics, final mortality data, 1990-1994 and period linked birth/infant death data, 1995-present. • Retrieved August 22, 2011, from www.marchofdimes.com/peristats.

Infant Mortality

Some of the leading causes of infant death in the United States include the following:
birth defects; prematurity/low birthweight;
sudden infant death syndrome; maternal complications of pregnancy and respiratory distress syndrome.

Grief and the Family

- Children will have a reaction to grief.
- Parents must work through their own grief and will also have many concerns for surviving children.

Grief Defined:

1. Multi-faceted response to loss, particularly to the loss of someone or something to which a bond was formed.
2. Normal process of reacting to a loss.
3. Intense sorrow, great sadness, heartache, pain, misery.

Responses to Grief



Physical
Emotional
Spiritual
Psychological

Coping with Grief

Children tend to ACT OUT their feelings and fears rather than talking about them.

- Anger
- Guilt
- Regression
- Silence
- Panic
- Over activity
- Temper outbursts
- Withdrawal

Talking to Children

Avoid euphemisms such as “passed away” or “gone to sleep” or “lost.”

Explain the term “dead” or “death” in age appropriate terms. Allow the child(ren) to ask questions.

Brief, honest answers.

Child's Perception: 3-6 years of age

Child thinks death is reversible; temporary, like going to sleep or when a parent goes to work; believes that people who die will come back.

3-6 years of age

- Greatly impacted by parent's emotional state.
- Difficulty with abstract concepts such as heaven.
- Regressive behaviors.
- Short periods of sadness.
- Escapes into play.
- Hungers for affection and physical contact.

3-6 years of age

- Keep normal routines when possible.
- Provide opportunities to play and draw.
- Read age appropriate books to child on death and loss.
- Make sure child does not feel responsible for death.
- Avoid clichés and euphemisms.
- Balance regressive behavior and discipline.

6-9 years of age

- Fear death is contagious and others can “catch it.”
- Asks concrete questions.
- Guilt, may blame self for the death.
- Difficulty expressing feelings verbally.
- Somatic symptoms.
- Difficulty comprehending abstractions such as heaven and spirituality.

Treasured family time.



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6-9 years of age

- Talk with child and ask questions.
- Ensure child does not feel responsible for the death.
- Allow for play, drawing, art.
- Be honest and avoid clichés.
- Help child with positive memories of the deceased.
- Model healthy coping behaviors.



Siblings releasing butterflies
at a memorial event.

Have children
involved in
activities and
events
remembering
baby who died.

9-13 years of age

- Concerned how their world will change.
- Increase anger and/or guilt.
- Somatic symptoms.
- School phobia.
- Self conscious about their fears (of own death, other family members).

9-13 years of age

- Encourage discussion of their concerns.
- Allow for regressive behaviors.
- Be honest.
- Gently relieve child from attempts to take over adult responsibilities.
- Avoid clichés.
- Model health coping behavior.

13-18 years of age

- Death is viewed as an interruption; an enemy.
- Increased vulnerability due to many other changes and losses simultaneously occurring.
- May increase risk taking in effort to reduce anxiety or to defy fate; suicidal thoughts.
- May intellectualize or romanticize death.
- May need permission to grieve.
- Questions religious/spiritual beliefs.

For Teen Mothers who experience loss

- May or may not have parental support.
- May or may not have father of baby involved.
- Need support person who offers appropriate grief modeling.
- Written material by Connie Nykiel listed on resource handout.

Sibling Grief: Challenges

- NICU sibling visitation policy
- Multiple siblings in the family
- Family dynamics
- Staff support



What can you do?

- Be a listening ear.
- Learn what to expect from surviving children.
- Ask staff to make memorabilia for children in addition to parents (for example, second set of foot prints or additional photo- if appropriate).
- See handout list of resources and reading materials.

What can staff do?

- Offer bereavement materials.
- Making referrals or ensure contacts are made:
 - Chaplaincy
 - Social Work or Case Worker
 - Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep

Seeking Support

- Local support network
- Share, Inc
- Hospice
- CLIMB, Inc
- Private counseling
- Pastoral or faith community support
- Family support



Seeking Support

- Older children may wish to attend the memorial service or funeral.
- Younger children may or may not.
- Do NOT assume anything. Communicate with the children and other family members regarding services and viewing the infant's body.

Communication



- At home
- At play
- At school/daycare
- Through reading
- Through artwork
- Through music

Aging Grief

- As child matures, responses to a past loss may change.
- The infant who died is always part of the family.
- Loss of “future.”
- Allow conversation and meaningful events to remember the infant who has died.

Remembering Baby



Balloon Release with
family members

- Birthday
- Anniversary of death
- Holidays

**Although it is difficult today
to see beyond the sorrow,
may looking back in memory
help comfort you tomorrow.**

Author Unknown



Remember together....

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Bibliography

National Center for Health Statistics, final mortality data, 1990-1994 and period linked birth/infant death data, 1995-present. • Retrieved August 22, 2011, from www.marchofdimes.com/peristats.

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Ilse, S., Burns, L., Martinex, S., Sibling Grief. Wintergreen Press 3630 Eillen Street, Maple Plain, MN 55359 www.wintergreenpress.com.

*Attached word document offers many great reading resources for parents and children who are experiencing the loss of an infant in their family.