

# *Talking to Children about Loss*

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## Acknowledgement of difficulty

Losing a baby at any stage of pregnancy is devastating, no matter the circumstances. With the loss of a baby, sometimes the hardest people to talk to about it are your other children. Show empathy for yourself and remember that there is no rulebook for talking to your children about death and dying. These conversations are incredibly hard and painful, but they will allow you to be more open with your children and share the grieving process with them. You know your child better than anyone else does. You have an ability to sense how your child is feeling and reacting better than anyone else. Remember that this is a tremendously difficult process and that it's okay to cry in front of your child. Expressions of grief are normal, and allowing yourself to be emotionally vulnerable in front of your children helps to normalize grief.

## Overview of how to talk to children about death

With the loss of a baby, one of the hardest things to do is to share this information with your children. Although each family's situation is unique, these are some general suggestions that may be helpful in approaching these difficult discussions:

**Suggestion #1: When talking to children about death, try to use facts and direct language instead of euphemisms.** Children often understand language in a much more literal sense than adults do and abstract concepts can be difficult for them to understand. Although being straightforward may seem callous especially since we want to protect our children, clarity is crucial. Euphemisms can be confusing for children, so aim to provide explanations that you feel comfortable with, but are clear, honest, and easy for your child to understand.

- Here are examples of some common euphemisms often associated with death:
  - *"They're in a better place."* For adults, this phrase usually refers to heaven or a form of afterlife. However, it is often difficult for children to comprehend these concepts and might lead them to believe that the lost baby will come back
  - *"They went away."* This phrase could be confusing to children because it might lead to feelings of abandonment, confusion or concern, or hope that the lost baby might eventually return.
  - *"We lost the baby."* Young children might interpret "lost" as "misplaced" and worry that they may be "lost" too.

**Suggestion #2: Remind your child that the baby's death was nobody's fault.** Sometimes, especially at a younger age, children might feel guilt if they engage in "magical thinking" (e.g. "it's my fault the baby died because I didn't want a sibling"). Also offer reassurance that having

a stillbirth or miscarriage doesn't mean that there is something wrong with you. They may worry that you are ill and need reassurance that you are okay.

**Suggestion #3: Allow your child space and opportunity to express their emotions.** Reassure them that others around them will be sad, and that it's normal for them to also cry and feel sad. Remind your child that you are there for them and that they can come to you if they want to share their thoughts.

**Suggestion #4: Let your child know that the baby will always be a part of the family.** Assure them that it's okay to talk about the baby and ask questions. You could consider telling your child the baby's name if you have chosen one. You might also suggest an activity to do together as a goodbye to the baby, such as planting a tree, painting a picture, releasing a balloon, or anything that feels right for your family.

**Suggestion #5: Remember that each family and child are different.** Practice self-compassion and remind yourself that there is no one correct way to talk to your child about death. Some things to consider as you prepare for these difficult conversations include your child's age, their maturity, and their ability to understand.

## **Overview of children's grief responses at different ages**

Age has a large influence on how children understand and respond to loss. Keep in mind that these are soft guidelines, and that there are other factors that may impact exactly how your children will react, such as maturity and past experiences. Remember that each child grieves differently and that your child's grief will likely look different than your own.

### **Under age 2**

- Children this young cannot conceptualize death and its finality. They may be aware that something is missing or different and sense the emotion felt by grownups in their lives. Provide simple clear explanations and reassurance that they are loved. If possible, stick to a normal routine to impart a sense of security, normalcy, and comfort.

### **Ages 2-4**

- Most children ages 2-4 still don't understand the finality of death and may see it as reversible or not permanent. They may not be able to verbally express how they are feeling and might experience separation anxiety. In these cases, it may be helpful to prepare for your absence in advance and offer reassurance and consistency.

### **Ages 4-9**

- Around this age, some children may begin “magical thinking,” when children believe their thoughts or feelings can make things happen. They may feel guilt or irrationally responsible for the baby’s death. Children this age may also lack the words to express feelings of grief and loss, which might result in anger and frustration. It is helpful to encourage expression of feelings through discussion or physical outlets.

### **Ages 9-12**

- Most children this age understand the finality of death and may be curious about the physical aspects of death. They know how to express their feelings but might be hesitant to without encouragement. They may also be concerned about how others are reacting. If you feel comfortable, involve them in discussions regarding memorials, funerals, etc.

### **Ages 12 and older**

- By this age, children usually possess a more adult perspective on death. Involving them in conversations about funerals, memorials, belongings, etc. will be helpful for their grief process. Let them know you are available for conversation, share your own feelings, and encourage them to express their emotions. Some might feel more comfortable talking about their feelings with someone outside of the family, and support groups or counselors may be helpful.

## **Discussion of your own grief expression/parenting**

- “My recent miscarriage was hard enough, but I’m finding it even harder to answer my son’s questions about why Mummy’s crying.” ([miscarriageassociation.org/uk](http://miscarriageassociation.org/uk))
- “It was so hard to know what to say to them. I was so devastated that it was hard to find the strength to try to appear normal for them.” ([miscarriageassociation.org/uk](http://miscarriageassociation.org/uk))
- “We said it’s like planting seeds-only some of them grow into healthy plants.” ([miscarriageassociation.org/uk](http://miscarriageassociation.org/uk))
- “I told her that Mummy found it hard to make babies stay in her tummy and that I was extremely lucky to have her, and that she was a special little girl.” ([miscarriageassociation.org/uk](http://miscarriageassociation.org/uk))

## Ways to support your children and yourself

- **Make sure you feel well supported when you have these hard conversations with your children.** If you feel comfortable, it may be helpful to enlist the help of a partner, family member, or friend who can be a part of the conversation in case you find yourself overwhelmed. It can also be difficult to balance your children's needs with your own.
- **Assure that your child feels safe, secure, and loved.** In the face of unpredictable events like pregnancy loss, children appreciate reassurance that they are cared for and protected. Remind them that, even though you are sad now, you are still a happy, healthy, and loving family.
- **Keep lines of communication open between you and your child.** Let your child know that it's okay to ask questions and talk about the baby. Reassure them that you are there for them if they want to talk or share their feelings.
- **Join a support group.** Sharing your feelings with others who have experienced pregnancy loss can be comforting. Support groups can help you find support and provide useful resources to help navigate the pain of your baby's loss.
- **Be patient with yourself.** Remember that you need time to recover emotionally. Some days may be harder than others, and certain things may be painful reminders of your loss. Your
- **Let your friends and family know how to best support you.** Family and friends may want to rally around and visit often. Some parents appreciate this and others might find it exhausting. Be honest about what you need and let trusted family and friends know how they can help (e.g. home cooked meals, looking after other children, running errands, etc.).
- **Remember that you can call on Empty Arms.** It's normal to feel confused and alone and many wish they had someone they could lean on for emotional support. We have a system set up to support you. There are three options you can choose from:
  1. Text 413-570-0811 and send the message "Support". When we receive this message, we will give you a call back as soon as we possibly can.
  2. Call us directly: 413-570-0811. If we don't answer, leave us a message and we'll call you back. We are available to help to talk you through your options, your anxieties, and your feelings on a peer level.

3. Send us an email explaining your situation and what you'd like help with:  
[emptyarmsbereavement@gmail.com](mailto:emptyarmsbereavement@gmail.com)



**You are not alone.**