

# Some Considerations about the Unique Effect of a SIDS or Other Sudden, Unexpected Infant Death on Children

**When a sudden, unexpected death of a child occurs**, the other children in the family or daycare setting are forced to deal with a most devastation situation. They may have had to deal with the initial shock and trauma when someone, perhaps even another child, found a baby dead who had previously seemed perfectly well; with the arrival of emergency personnel and other professionals; and with an atmosphere filled with many questions, doubts and, in some cases, suspicions. The surviving children often have seen the tears, heard the whispers, and noted the confusion, fright, shock, panic, and stress of the adults as well as the pained and unusual situation in the home or daycare center. Nobody was prepared for the death; nobody, adult or child, had a chance to say goodbye; all involved have many unmet grieving needs.

“Because parents have such a hard time coming to grips with a SIDS (loss themselves)...and because there is NO explanation, this type of death is especially hard to explain to children...Hugging, answering questions, and crying together. Sometimes that’s all you can do. It will be a long time before (a) family will be able to make sense out of this...if ever. For a long time all will be struggling with feelings of guilt and grief and the question, “What happened?” (Schaefer) “It is normal for both adults and children to feel unexplained confusion and rage about an unexplained death like SIDS.” (Horchler)

## Reminders for Adults Dealing with Grieving Children

- That the varied reactions of children to death are normal expressions of grief and usually not signs of disturbed behavior; that sometimes children react by being mad, when indeed they are really sad, by expressing anger, when it is really doubt or confusion they are feeling; that children may lash out at a parent or caregiver because they think adults could/should have prevented the death; that children may grieve in spurts, crying one moment, laughing the next; that children do not know what is considered appropriated behavior at a time such as this; and that grieving is a very complex process for all.
- To acknowledge the grief of children; to allow children to confront the death; to let children mourn; to let children know that their grief will not be discounted or considered unimportant; to let children know that talking about or even act out the death is ok; “Children must not become the forgotten mourners...they must be included in the mourning process, or else they will feel their grief is not important.” (Wolfelt) Adults should not underestimate what most children can grasp about death, for children can usually absorb the information and adjust it to fit their understanding of what happened.
- NOT to delay talking about what happened; to encourage children to talk about the death immediately and frequently and in whatever way is most comfortable, even if this means that they go over the event repeatedly.
- That the passage of time is perhaps THE most important healing factor in the grief process. (Experts on early childhood development indicate that it takes at least six months for a normal routine to resume after the death of someone significant in a child’s life; that frequently the worst time for survivors is about six months after the death; and that the first year is usually the hardest in a family situation.)
- To show visible signs of love, support, and caring to surviving children using physical signs of affection such as frequent hugging or warm verbal expressions of support or concern. (In

family situations, it may be helpful for all to grieve openly together, for adults to show children that they need not be afraid to talk about the child who died or show open signs of emotion, such as sadness or tears.)

- That in most critical situations, including the death of someone close, the best way for adults to deal with children is with honesty in language that they can understand using simple, easily understood answers. (DO NOT use dishonest or evasive terms or expressions such as “he went away,” or “God wanted your sister with Him because she was so good,” or “your friend when to sleep.”)
- To make special effort to really listen to what children are saying or trying to say, helping them to express doubts, thoughts, or questions, if necessary, and not trying to put your thoughts and feelings into words for them. (Adults also need to notice what children are not expressing, for these omissions may be of equal importance in trying to understand what children are really thinking or feeling.)
- That it is ok to tell children, “I can’t give you a good answer. There is no explanation” or “No, it isn’t fair that this happened to your brother or friend” or “I worry about that, too.” (When the death of a child occurs, adults are often placed in the position of trying to explain to children something they themselves don’t understand.)
- To encourage children to talk to each other about the loss, as grieving children can be a great source of help and comfort to each other.
- To allow children to express memories or recollections of the child who has died, for example, by starting a book, diary, or journal of thoughts or feelings or a box or photo album of mementos; by remembering the deceased child in art or drawings; by telling stories about the child; by directing children in playing games or in other activities in which they express the loss; and by remembering the child who died on special days such as birthdays and holidays.
- To permit children to express the concerns they have, not only for themselves, but for the child who died and/or for their parents or other family members; to allow surviving children to be a source of comfort to others, even adults. (At times like this, children often express concern for the other significant people in their lives.)
- To allow children who are old enough or who express a wish to do so to be included in memorial services, for rituals are a part of life and a source of help in building memories of the child who died. (It is important to explain to children beforehand what a funeral is and to take special care to mention that rituals such as this provide grieving family and friends a time, place, and occasion to remember the child who died and a way to say good-bye.)
- To obtain helpful books or other informational materials to explain death and/or memorial or funeral services to children. (The use of examples familiar to children such as the loss of a pet or reference to the cycles of nature may prove helpful in teaching children about death and helping them to understand that death, after all, is part of the cycle of every living thing.)
- To try, as far as possible, to maintain a normal routine, as children need the security of knowing that their world remains intact but that life, although changed, goes on.
- That there are special grief situations that require special responses or information, such as the death of a twin, the unique but complicated grief of teenagers, or when explaining the death to a subsequent child at a later date.
- That, as adults, they are the role models for grieving children, even if they are mourning themselves. The display of legitimated emotions, such as tears, controlled anger, or fear, doesn’t harm children. What is harmful is denying grief, refusing to talk or let others talk about the death, the display of irrational anger or guilt, or extending blame after the loss. Parents and other adults in grief need to show children open and compassionate ways to mourn. It is not only OK but necessary for all who knew and treasured the child who died to grieve. But children are unusually sensitive to the emotions of the adults around them and will imitate these reactions, especially in unfamiliar situations.

The four most important concepts adults should remember when helping children understand about and cope with death are:

Be Truthful — Be Loving — Be Accepting — Be Consistent

## **General Comments on Children and Grief**

Because children are often so open and honest in asking questions and expressing their feelings, they can and often do teach adults a lot about grief. Children, as they learn how to receive comfort, can learn how to give comfort in return; they can often show others compassionate and spontaneous ways to grieve; and at times they can be the ones to make adults confront and deal with a death and some of its unanswered questions.

But most of all at this time, children themselves need understanding, a patient attitude, compassion, and love from the adults around them. Supportive responses and frequent gestures of care and concern from adults to grieving children can result in a sad time, a time of crisis and pain, becoming a way “to help prepare (adults and children) for losses yet to come. For mortal as we all are, they will come” (Kubler-Ross in Fitzgerald). “Communication patterns in the family determine the way in which the surviving members are able to live with the sad and joyful memories of the dead child and with their combined and separate understanding... of (the death.)” (Arnold)

Children are intimately involved in the loss. They cannot and should not be dismissed. Adults **MUST** “become aware of the tremendous importance of being truthful, open, and caring, the importance of allowing children to ask questions, and confirm the reality of confronting them; the importance of allowing them to go through the painful but therapeutic process of grief.” (Kubler-Ross in Fitzgerald) Accept their feelings, fears, reactions, and questions while allowing them to share your grief, your fears, your tears.

The way a death in a family or childcare center is handled can have a lasting, even lifelong impression on a child. Every member of the family or the group is affected by the death, from the oldest to youngest. The response and understanding shown at this time can affect whether children come to learn to trust or distrust adults and how they come to value family, friendships, loving, communication, life, and, of course, death. “All caregivers can play a positive role in facilitating healthy mourning among grieving children so that they may heal and grow emotionally, intellectually, and socially, thereby strengthening them to live life to its fullest.” (Pine, et al.) If children are allowed to grieve openly and freely at the time of the loss, they will be better prepared to deal with other losses and challenges as they grow older. “Not learning to mourn well can result in not loving or living well.” (Wolfelt) Experts know that children’s grief, like that of adults, cannot be cured, but must be worked through, and that grief is a part of healing, a life-long process. Children must know that it is legitimated, healthy, and even courageous to express grief. Grief is a form of suffering and it needs to be admitted. “Grief is not an illness, but a part of life.” (Wolfelt)

When a death occurs in a family or childcare center, changes do take place, and they must be acknowledged. But also children need to know that some things will not change—that there is continuity and consistency. Most of all, surviving children need to know that the child who died will not be forgotten, but will always be cherished and remembered. That child was and is part of the family or group history. Surviving children also need to know that they are still valued—that they belong and are still cherished. “Although grief is a universal emotion, coping with it is a skill that must be acquired” (Newsweek). Adults, even though grieving themselves, must help the children in their care to accomplish this.