



Talking to Children about Death

Think about the age of the child. As with everything else, how a child views and reacts to the death of a family member is connected with his/her physical and emotional maturity. A three year old needs to be treated and spoken to differently than a teenager. Just remember that regardless of age, all members of the family will be affected by the baby's death.

Let the children tell you what they need. Listen to the child carefully, he or she will tell you what they need. Answer questions honestly, simply and as many times as they are asked. Children grieve differently than adults, so allow them to "play" out their emotions. Don't be surprised if you find a younger child in the corner replaying the death of their baby brother/sister with friends or dolls, or an older child wanting to go out and play with their friends. These types of behaviors are common and do not mean that a child isn't feeling pain; it only means that the death is being handled in a manner that is comfortable for them.

Create an atmosphere where a child can express fears and emotions. A child may feel many confusing emotions which are no different than a SIDS parent. However, they do not have the emotional maturity or life experience to understand them. Expect to hear expressions of anger, fear, and confusion. Never tell a child that they shouldn't be feeling a certain way. They are entitled to their feelings and most will pass with time.

Help a child to deal with their fears. Younger children don't think in the abstract, to them everything is concrete and real. If you tell them fairy tales about the death, like the baby went to sleep, or the angel of death took the baby, you may find that they become frightened that the same thing may happen to them. One of the biggest fears for preschool children is somehow they too will die and be separated from their parent. When explaining death use the correct words, such as, "Joey is dead." "He won't be coming back." Even though a child doesn't quite understand what that means, he/she will start to understand that death is not reversible.

Reassure a child by sharing your feelings with them. Let them know that you too are sad about their brother/sister's death. Make sure they know that nothing they did or said or wished caused the baby to die. A child should be allowed but not forced to attend the funeral. Children also need to say good-bye. They can choose the most comfortable way to do so. You might suggest to the parent they ask their child/children if they would like to keep something of the baby's to remember their brother/sister.

Ask for help. If you find that a parent can not talk to their child or are too distressed to deal with their child's emotions, suggest they speak to their minister, rabbi, or doctor. You can also encourage them to call their local public health nurse or local SIDS parent support group. Just remember, there are many people who are available to help SIDS families through this difficult and sad time.



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