



Helping Children Grieve



CALIFORNIA
SIDS
PROGRAM
SUDDEN INFANT
DEATH SYNDROME

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT
OF HEALTH SERVICES MCH

Sudden Infant Death Syndrome

Helping Children Grieve

This booklet was written for people caring for children whose baby brother or sister has died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). Parents, grandparents, teachers, child care providers, clergy and other friends and relatives can all help children with the grief they feel.

When someone close to us dies, all of us grieve. We may show that grief in many ways. When a baby dies suddenly with no warning, the whole family must cope with all kinds of confusing emotions. Everyone is touched deeply by the baby's death. Children, like adults, need a way to express how they are feeling. They need help and support. They need to feel loved and valued.

Everyone touched by the baby's death deals with many feelings.

People going through grief often feel fear, anger, guilt, and sadness. Children have these feelings, too. It's important to look at these feelings in yourself and be open to them. Then you can help the child deal with these emotions, too.

“It was real scary. When my dad got back from the hospital—that's when I found out my baby brother died. I didn't know what SIDS was.”



Learning first hand that death really happens can bring fear.

When SIDS happens, it's hard for anyone to trust in life the way they did before. Many things seem to be out of control. For example, children may be afraid that they will die, too. Or that other people they love will die. They need to hear that SIDS happens only to babies.

Children may also be afraid of getting sick. Parents may find themselves calling their doctor about any sign of illness. It is normal to worry. As time goes by, you and your children will begin to feel more in control and more confident.

Because the baby "left" the family, children may be afraid parents and other people they love will leave them and not come back. Children may want to be close to their parents or other loved ones all the time. This is normal. In time, children will become more comfortable about being separated for short periods of time.

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"It was real scary. When my dad got back from the hospital — that's when I found out my baby brother died. I didn't know what SIDS was."

Maria, age 8

Anger is very understandable for anyone in grief.

Some children may be angry at what caused the baby to die. Others may be mad at everything and everybody in general. Other children may show their anger by "acting out"—breaking things and fighting.

A grieving child may also be angry at the baby who died. After all, this pain and grief was caused by the baby's death. It is normal for people who grieve to have these feelings.

It is good for children to show their anger in a safe way. Help the child talk about the anger and why he or she is mad. Let the child know that it's OK to be angry. Help the child show his or her anger in a way that doesn't hurt others.

.....
"I want to slug God because he took my baby away. And when I see my brother in heaven, I'm going to have to pound him. Then I'll hug him, 'cause I've missed him so much."

Justin, age 8

Children often feel guilt about the baby's death.

Like adults, children worry that something they did or thought somehow caused the baby's death. Any child with a new baby brother or sister at times wish that the baby had not been born. It's very important to let children know that their thoughts or "wishes" did not cause the baby's death. You might want to tell the child, "I know that sometimes you got mad at the baby. You may have wished that he would go away. But making a wish like that did not make the baby die."

It's important to tell children what we know about SIDS:

- Nothing you did or thought caused the baby to die.
- No one knows when SIDS will happen.
- No one could have stopped it.

.....
"We were all asleep when it happened. But we all kept thinking—maybe if someone had gotten up and picked him up. We just were tearing ourselves up about it."

Tim, age 15

Even very small children may feel sadness when a baby dies.

A child may show this sorrow by not being as active. The child may cry or be very quiet. They may seem "normal" at times and very sad at other times. All that is to be expected.

When should we worry that a child is feeling too sad, fearful, angry or guilty?

Time is important. What might be normal in the first month or two after the baby's death may be a reason to worry a few months later. Within four to six months after the baby's death, most children can begin to return to a fairly normal routine.

Not wanting to play a favorite game or see friends or do schoolwork is normal at first. Later on, the child should become more interested in these things again.

Eating and sleeping may not return to normal for many months. If the child is losing weight or having nightmares all the time, counseling may be needed.

Teachers, clergy, doctors and other friends and relatives can help parents keep a mindful eye on children who are grieving.

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"I didn't want to cry. I felt like a baby when I cried."

Josh, age 8

“We were all asleep when it happened. But we all kept thinking—maybe if someone had gotten up and picked him up. We just were tearing ourselves up about it.”





“ We all talk about him. I think it makes my parents feel better. It makes me feel better.”

It's important to talk about the baby's death.

Death can be hard to understand. But not talking about it can make it even harder for children to cope with the baby's death. Don't wait for the child to talk about it. Children may not bring up the subject because they know how much the parents are hurting. They may want to protect the parents from pain.

It's best to be direct and honest about the baby's death. With very young children the death can be explained in terms of what the baby can no longer do. "When people die, they can't breathe or eat or play anymore."

Even young children can be told the baby died of SIDS. They can be told that nobody really knows why it happens. Children will need to hear that SIDS happens only to babies. Grown-ups and children like them cannot die of SIDS.

No one is to blame for SIDS.

Children should know that nothing anyone did or did not do caused the baby's death. It is very important to explain this if the child was the first to find the baby dead.

If the baby died in the care of a child care provider, the other children present will need to hear about what happened. They will need help to understand and deal with the baby's death.

Some children may ask questions right away. Others may not. There are ways to encourage questions. You can talk about your own feelings and then ask if the child has any feelings like that. Or you can tell a story about how other children often feel. For example, "Some children worry that _____ . Do you have any worries like that?"

Parents may have a hard time answering the difficult questions children sometimes ask. Other friends or relatives can help.

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"It's kind of hard to get it out of my mind. I told everyone in my class about it. It helped to talk about it."

Susie, age 7

Couldn't we just say the baby "went away" or "went to sleep?"

Children often think you mean just what you say. If they are told the baby went far away, they may become frightened of going on trips. And since the baby died while sleeping, it's important not to use the term "went to sleep" when talking about the death. Children may become afraid to go to sleep or take naps.

Is it a problem to tell a child that the baby went to heaven?

For people who are religious, their faith can be a source of strength in a difficult time. It is good to remember, however, that young children can be confused or frightened by some religious ideas. Explaining that God needed the baby may make a child feel that God is mean or selfish. For example, one mother told her child that God took the baby so he could sing in the Angel's choir on Christmas Day. At first the little girl was very angry at God for taking the baby. And later, on Christmas Day, she was heart-broken that her baby brother was not singing in the choir at church.

First tell the child that the baby died. Then share your beliefs about death, using words that your child knows and understands. Your clergy may be able to help.

Should the children be sent to stay with relatives?

Everyone in the family grieves when a baby dies. Having the chance to say goodbye together is important for every member of the family.

Some parents may want to have someone their child loves and trusts care for him or her at home. Or, the child can spend some time with friends and relatives during the day, if parents need time to themselves. The child could come home each evening and be in familiar surroundings. Being separated from parents for long periods can be hard for children, especially during a family crisis like this.

Should children go to the funeral?

Going to the funeral is one way children can say good-bye to their baby brother or sister. It can be good for children to take part in this way, if they want to. Some children feel better if they can bring some small gift—a drawing, a flower or some small toy—to the baby.

Before going to the funeral, a family member or friend can explain to the children what they will be hearing and seeing. Someone can be with each child and answer their questions in a simple, loving way that suits their ages.

Going to the funeral may help your child. But you know your child best.

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“My dad’s friend knew we lost our baby. He gave us some wood and my dad and my brothers and I built the casket for our baby. It felt good to do that.”

Joe, age 12

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“Ask the person if they want to go to the funeral or not. For me, it was a good thing to be there. But my sister didn’t feel comfortable seeing the baby lying there.”

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“Before my brother was born, we all made him a blanket. We trade off using it now.”

There are many ways children can remember their brother or sister who died.

Here are a few ways families have encouraged children to show their feelings. Your child could:

- Make his or her own memory book of their baby brother or sister.
- Draw pictures, or write a poem or story.
- Make a photo album with pictures of the baby.
- Make up a song.
- Tell a friend about the baby.
- Talk into a tape recorder and tell about what he or she remembers about the baby.
- Write a letter to the baby.
- Do something special on the baby's birthday.

If your child is very young, you could record your memories of how they played together or things your child said about the baby and share them when your child gets older.

.....
“Before my brother was born, we all made him a blanket. We trade off using it now.”

Richie, age 9

We told our three-year-old girl that the baby died, but she talks as if her brother is still with us.

Why is that?

Children under five years of age often think of death as going away. They don't understand that the person can't come back.

It's important not to give her ideas that she will have to unlearn in the future. You have told her that the baby died and can't come back. Someday your daughter will understand that. As she gets older, you can talk again about the baby's death. She will need more explanations as she grows up.

My five-year-old seems to think the baby's death is his fault.

What can I do?

Children between five and six years old are just starting to understand that death is final. But they still may think that something they did or thought could have caused the death. The best thing to do is remind your child that his wishes did not make the baby die.

.....
"I like to talk about my sister. I like remembering when she was happy and laughing."

Tasha, age 6

When I told my seven-year-old about the baby's death, he just went out to play. Is that normal?

Children between six and eight years of age understand that people die. But they don't believe it can happen to them, or someone they love. For this reason, your son may not yet have accepted the fact that the baby has died. It may take a few days, or weeks for the reality to sink in.

It's important to talk about the death with him from time to time. It might help to say that some children are frightened by the baby's death or that some children don't seem to want to talk about it. Letting him know you understand what he may be feeling can help a lot.

Sometimes my ten-year-old seems very worried and afraid about her own death. Other times she acts as though nothing has happened. Why is that?

Children between ten and twelve years of age know that death is the end of life on earth. And your child now knows that death can really happen and that it can happen with no warning. She understands that death could happen to her. She may sound unfeeling at times to cover up her own confusion and worry. Children of this age need to talk about their feelings about death and the meaning of life.

Things to remember

Children, like adults, have many feelings after the baby's death. Anger, sorrow, fear and guilt are normal feelings for people who grieve. Children may show these feelings of grief in many ways.

They may "act out" in anger. They may keep to themselves. They may get sick. They may "misbehave" at school or at home. They may cry, whine or cling to you more often than they used to. They may be afraid of being separated from their loved ones. They may be afraid of dying themselves. They may act as if nothing has happened. They may not want to talk about the baby at all. All this is to be expected.

There are many ways to help and support children in grief.

- Talk about the baby's death. Explain what you know about SIDS. Let children know they had nothing to do with the baby's death.

- Be open, honest and direct. This is especially important when children ask questions.

- Make sure children are, in some way, part of the grieving the family is going through. Invite them to the funeral if they want to go. Talk to them directly about what is being planned and let them take part in planning the goodbyes.

- Share your feelings of grief with the children. You do not need to hide your tears, sadness or anger. Being open can help them show their feelings, too. Let them know that grief and all these feelings are normal.

- Let children talk about feelings of fear, guilt and grief. Help them show these feelings in other ways, too.

- Find special ways to remember your baby who died. Talk about the happy memories you share as a family. Your children will want to know that the baby will always have a special place in your lives.

Would you like to talk to someone about this?

Call the California SIDS Program
800-369-SIDS (7437)

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