



# Sands

when a  
baby brother  
or sister dies



As you grieve for your baby who has died, you may also need to deal with the emotions and reactions of your other child/ren. You are all part of the same family and have all lost a precious family member. Remember that grieving is the **NORMAL** process for adjusting to the loss of someone we love.

Your child/ren's response to the death of their baby brother or sister will vary depending on their age, personality and previous experience of death. They will grieve, just as an adult does, but the way in which they express their grief will be different depending on their stage of development. For example, a very young child may view the death as temporary and reversible, while an older child may recognise that death is final and experience deep sadness and a sense of loss.

You may feel you want to protect your child/ren from this grieving, but they must be encouraged to express their grief, just like an adult, in order for the healing process to take place. They must also be supported through this time.

Children also have to cope with the emotional reactions of their parents, family and friends.

This leaflet is intended as a guide to some of the reactions your child/ren may experience as they grieve and to offer some help in the ways you can best support them.

**If you are old enough to love, you are old enough to grieve.**



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## Some reactions you might expect from your grieving child/ren and some ways you can support them ...

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- Your child/ren may feel guilty, especially if they felt at times that they didn't want a new baby. They need reassurance that nothing they did or said caused the baby's death.
- Your child/ren may feel angry with you for promising them a baby who has now died. They may also feel angry with the baby for causing everyone to be so sad.
- Your child/ren may feel insecure/frightened. 'Does Mum still love me?' 'Will I die too?' 'Will my daddy ever play with me again?'
- Your child/ren may have a fixation with death, such as playing 'death' games with dolls, coffins, etc. or asking lots of questions, for example, asking if other babies are dead or alive. Accept their play. Play is a child's way of acting out and making sense of what has happened. Encourage their questions, answering them as truthfully and simply as you are able to. As they talk and question, they are working through the experience and coming to their own understanding and acceptance. You may have to repeat the answers to some questions over and over
- Your child/ren may experience behavioural changes. They may become withdrawn, begin bedwetting, talk 'baby talk' or be very, very good to avoid causing you more pain. Try to accept these behavioural changes as part of the grieving process in the short term, but if they continue for a long period of time, it may be advisable to seek professional help from a doctor, counsellor, or Group Special Education (GSE).



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## Children's concepts of death (reproduced with permission from SIDS Wellington's 'Continuing the Loving' booklet)

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### Pre-schoolers:

- do not think the death is permanent
- react to loss and change.

### 5–9 years:

- may think death is final
- may not think of it happening to them
- need honest and accurate information.

### 10 years plus:

- understand the concept of finality – and may find it frightening and painful.

They may:

- ▶ have difficulty concentrating
- ▶ become withdrawn or isolated, angry or sad
- ▶ have physical complaints
- ▶ indulge in alcohol or drug abuse
- ▶ display impulsive behaviour
- ▶ increase their level of risk taking.



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## What can you do for your child/ren?

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- Encourage them to call the baby by his or her name and to acknowledge the baby as a member of your family.
- Let them see and hold their baby brother or sister if this is appropriate. Seeing the baby will give them a focus for their grief. Prepare them for seeing the baby and accept their responses, eg, they may state that the baby is a funny colour.

- Have photos taken of them with their baby brother or sister. Also take photos of you all together as a family.
- Explain what has happened, why (if you can) and what might happen in the days to follow. Use language that is direct, simple and truthful. Avoid using terms that can confuse them like 'passed away' and 'lost'. Don't be afraid to use the word 'dead'. Also try to avoid phrases like 'the baby has gone to sleep' because this can cause your other child/ren to become fearful that they might die when they go to sleep.
- Explain procedures and terms that may be unfamiliar to them such as funeral, cremation, funeral director, casket.
- Encourage your child/ren's questions. Answer them as truthfully and simply as you can. If you don't know, tell them so. As children change and develop, they need to have opportunities to talk again and seek more information. Another pregnancy or a death may spark new questions or the old ones again, but the child may comprehend and interpret the explanation differently. Encourage expressions of grief. The best way to 'teach' a child how to express grief is to model it yourself: 'It's okay to cry'. Allow them to express their feelings through artwork, writing, play, physical exercise.

Be honest with them about the way you are feeling and why you are reacting the way you are (this avoids confusion for the child):  
'When Mummy/Daddy sees other babies, she/he feels really sad about our baby dying.'  
'I'm sorry I got so angry with you, I feel very tired and I miss our baby very much.'

- Involve them in funeral preparations such as choosing songs, decorating an order of service sheet, picking some flowers. They may want to put something special in the casket – toys, flowers, drawings, etc.
- Try to maintain routine and order for your child/ren: regular meals, bedtime story, etc. If you find this difficult, maybe you could ask another family member or close friend to help with meals, transport to school, etc.
- Prepare your child/ren to talk to others about your baby's death. If you have been straightforward with your child/ren, they are likely to be straightforward with others. Prepare them for the reactions they may receive. For example, some people won't want them talking about the baby.
- Use support people to help your child/ren through their grieving. Make sure people such as teachers, friends and babysitters know what has happened so they can respond to your child/ren appropriately (maybe show them this leaflet). If you have any concerns, do seek professional help. Group Special Education – GSE (available through your school and kindergarten) can help, and there are also counsellors who specialise in children's grief. Ask your GP or Sands contact.
- Reassure your child/ren of your continuing love for them. Help them to know that their world is still a safe place to be in and you can be relied on to care for them.
- A very good New Zealand resource is Skylight, an organisation that supports children and teenagers through loss and change. Their contact details are available on: [www.skylight.org.nz](http://www.skylight.org.nz)



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## Caring for yourself when you have other children

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Because of your own feelings of grief, you may find dealing with your other child/ren particularly difficult. As a mother who has recently given birth, as well as mourning your dead baby, your body will be undergoing massive hormonal and emotional changes. As a father, you will be experiencing many intense emotions. You are likely to have to cope with several things at a time. As well as tiredness, you will also be dealing with funeral arrangements, notifying relatives and friends, etc. You will often be expected to be 'the strong one'.

Coping with your other child/ren may be extra difficult for both of you. Don't expect too much of yourselves.

If others offer to help with your child/ren and you feel this is appropriate for you, then it is okay for you to accept their offer. If it is not appropriate, then don't feel bad about refusing their offer.

Accept help, eg, with meals, when it is offered. Ask for help if it is not forthcoming.

Take time out for your own grieving, individually and together. Through Sands, you will be able to make contact with parents who have had a similar experience. It can be helpful to talk with others who understand. If you feel you are having trouble coping or have relationship problems that you feel you are unable to resolve, talk to your doctor, midwife, minister or a counsellor.



## What can you do as a family to express your grief?

Your baby who has died is, and always will be, a part of your family – a son or daughter, a brother or sister, a grandchild. Here are some suggestions of ways you might like to acknowledge your baby as part of your family:

- Draw up a family tree showing grandparents, parents and children (alive and dead).
- Create a memory book of your baby or a memory box.

Some things to include might be:

- ▶ keepsakes of your baby, eg, hospital bracelet, cot cards, prints of hands and feet
  - ▶ pictures that your other child/ren have drawn for and about your baby
  - ▶ poems or stories that have been written
  - ▶ a record of plans and dreams that you may have had for your baby.
- Do something special together to remember your baby at significant times, for example, the first anniversary of your baby's death, birthday, Christmas. Some ideas are:
    - ▶ Go on a special family outing.
    - ▶ Have a special candle lit – maybe at home.
    - ▶ Plant a tree or shrub.
    - ▶ Make special Christmas decoration with your baby's name on it.