

**Be a good listener**

Grieving people need to talk about their loss, acknowledge that they have been through a difficult experience. You can't fix their grief but you can be there, hear their story, and share their journey.

**Be a shoulder to cry on**

Allow them to cry with you, crying helps the release of emotions and this helps with healing.

**Be in touch with them**

Drop in, call on the telephone and say "I was thinking of you today" write a letter, send an email, remember special days like Christmas, birthdays and anniversaries.

When someone has experienced a loss, there will be big and small adjustments to be made in their lives. These could bring uncertainty, frustration, fear, sadness and change as each new day comes along. Grief is about adapting to change in life, thoughts, hopes, beliefs and the future.

**Be a friend**

Often being there is all that is needed to support someone who is grieving.

(Adapted from the writings of Doris Zagdanski)

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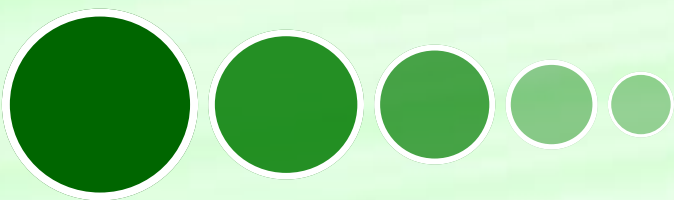
**NALAG (NSW) Inc**

National Association for Loss & Grief (NSW) Inc

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Explaining Death  
to Children





## Children, Loss and Grief

It is difficult enough for adults to deal with the loss and grief, be it death, miscarriage, separation or divorce. We at least know what death, separation, and divorce is and have our beliefs as to what follows and our knowledge as to what causes it. Children, particularly younger ones, don't have this understanding. They must try to understand the facts of the situation and the reactions of those around them while having a very limited understanding of the consequences.

Children grieve too. They need the same understanding and compassion as given to parents. Unfortunately they are often overlooked by others and even sent away to be "entertained" after a loss has occurred. To deal with the loss children need security, the reassurance of their relationship with their parents and clear explanations that suit their age and comprehension level.

If your child's behaviour changes from what you are used to, you may need to consider that they need some assistance in dealing with the loss and its consequences. Behaviour changes may include:

- Withdrawal from parents, friends, and teachers.
- Fighting, hitting, irritability, argumentativeness, moodiness, temper tantrums.
- Whingeing/whining.
- Refusal to go to school, preschool, kindy or daycare.
- Fear at being separated from parents.
- Going back to doing things you thought they had outgrown.
- Bedwetting.
- Sleep disturbances, "bad dreams".
- Appetite changes.
- Refusal to talk/baby talk.
- Becoming fearful of many things. Eg. monsters.
- Loss of interest in things/loss of concentration.

## Explaining Death to Children

Explaining the death of your baby or a miscarriage to your other children is a very difficult, very personal and very private thing. You, as parents, know your children the best and what will be the most effective way to help them cope with the situation. Choose the time and place that feels right for both parent and child preferably so that you will not feel rushed or embarrassed. There are a few things to remember when explaining death.

Make sure your explanation is clear and tailored to suit the child's age, understanding of death and his/her need for detail.

Use the words "death" or "dead" rather than words like "lost" or "asleep" which can lead to children developing fears of ordinary events.

Take your time to explain. Speak slowly and let the child take in what you have said. Pause at times to gauge the child's reactions. Let children share pictures and other mementos of the baby.

Be guided by the children's reactions and questions. Children's play and drawings may also give you some indication of what they understand about what has happened.

Be prepared to repeat your explanations and give more detail if, and as often as the child needs it. Their questions and the need to have the story retold can arise, hours, days, weeks, even years later as the child thinks about the death and develops intellectually and emotionally.

Constantly check what the child has understood about what death is, what has happened to the baby and the body and what caused the baby's death. Children often misinterpret what has been said or take things said out of context. Asking them questions about what you have said can help you check their understanding and correct any misconceptions.

Before explaining the death to your children, be sure yourself of what you believe has happened and what will happen to the baby now. Tell your children what

you honestly believe as misunderstandings will be less likely to occur. If your family has no religious beliefs, now is not the time to introduce the concepts of heaven and an afterlife unless you believe in these and wish your child to hold the same beliefs. Children will need more explanation in such cases.

Remember that if you feel you have made a mistake in explaining the death to your child, this can be corrected through honest discussion with him or her.

## Parenting under difficult circumstances

You, as parents who have experienced the death of a baby or a miscarriage have enough difficulty coping with your own emotions. It is often difficult to also cope with the grief of your children as well as their ordinary everyday demands. This is particularly true if your children's grief shows itself in behaviour that is new and difficult to cope with.

It is not surprising that at times you may become short tempered with, or withdrawn from your children. Later you may feel guilty for not being there for your children at such a difficult time for them.

Be gentle with yourself. Accept that this is grief and forgive yourself. Above all, be honest with your children. If you have yelled or smacked unfairly, admit your mistake and say you're sorry. Explain to them your feelings. You'd be surprised what children can understand and how accepting they can be. Above all, let them know you love them because knowing this will help them overlook some of your more inconsistent behaviour.

*Adapted from An Ache in their Hearts Resource Package © 1993*

