

When a Baby Dies



You are the greatest gift you can give grieving parents. Holding a hand, touching a shoulder, giving a hug says, "I'm here. I care." By letting parents talk about their pain, you can help them come to grips with it. You shouldn't assume that parents "don't want to talk about it." And it's okay to say, "I don't know what to say" - it's honest, and it opens the door for the parents to share their feelings.

There are words that help and words that hurt.

Do say: "I'm sorry."

"What can I do for you right now?"

"I'm here. I want to listen."

"This must be so very hard for you."

Like other parents, they want to talk about their baby. You can help them do that by saying:

"Tell me about your labor and delivery."

"What did your baby weigh and how long was she?"

Some things you say may be well-intentioned but aren't at all helpful.

Don't say: "You're young, you can have others."

"You have an angel in heaven." (They want their baby here)

"This happened for the best."

"Better for this to happen now, before you knew the baby."

"There was something wrong with the baby anyway."

"Don't be sad. Don't cry." (They may well NEED to cry)

"Don't dwell on this. Just put it behind you."

"If you need anything, call me." (YOU call them)

Let parents make their own decisions about the funeral and what to do with the baby's room or clothing. Don't deprive them of experiencing the reality of death. Don't assume that they want you to "take over." You can make suggestions, or offer to help with the funeral (by making lunch, for example), but let them make their own decisions - it gives them a sense of control when their

emotions are out of control.

Sometimes, you can be the biggest help by doing the smallest things - preparing meals, cleaning the house, doing laundry, caring for children.

Many people bring a meal in the first days after the death. Though thoughtful, these acts can be overwhelming when they come all at once (particularly if the family doesn't have a freezer.) Often, in the weeks after the funeral, parents find themselves disorganized and unable to do daily chores. You might organize a "help chain" of friends to rotate duties such as meal preparation. One person can bring a meal Monday, for example, and line up the next day's helper. That way, the family members know the y won't be inundated all at once, but can count on others during the difficult times ahead.

Attending the funeral shows you care and support, and demonstrates your recognition that this baby was unique, even though she or he didn't live long.

Giving a special memento or writing a poem or letter to the baby are also special ways of saying good-bye.

If you can't attend the funeral, send a letter or note. These acknowledgements may be a treasured part of the "baby book" that many bereaved parents keep.

The shock of a baby dying can be so overwhelming that parents aren't aware of their surroundings and can't make sound judgments. They may not know that they shouldn't drive at those times. Offer to drive them home, to the hospital, and/or the funeral.

The loss of a baby affects the entire family, including siblings. Children may not know what death is or be able to understand it. But even the youngest child feels the tension and sadness.

Children do grieve. Acknowledge their loss. Children express their feelings through artwork or play. One way -to comfort them is to let them give "their" baby a favorite toy, picture, or gift that will always be with them.

Adults want to "protect" children from loss. But children need to be included as much as they or their parents want them to be. Don't tell children the baby is "sleeping", "on a trip", or "lost." Those words can frighten a child. Say instead that the baby's body stopped working and died. Emphasize that it was "nothing anyone did or didn't do." Children may need repeated assurance that they didn't cause the death, that thoughts or words don't make babies die.

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