



Should my older living children be involved?

Information and resources for bereaved parents about the option to bring your stillborn or deceased baby home.

Our initial reaction when we think of our children, or those children close to us, is to protect them from hurt and harm. This is a natural reaction and of course when we think of bringing our deceased baby home, many parents want to know whether it's helpful for their living children to see their deceased brother or sister, and to be involved in any funeral rituals.

Children are incredible. They are much more resilient than we imagine and they are wonderfully literal, they often see the world in black and white and not in the infinite shades of grey we see as adults. With this in mind, explaining death, especially the death of a baby, is usually best described clearly and simply. It's best not to use euphemistic terms such as sleeping or gone away or sometimes even gone to heaven. Children understand language in a literal way, so if a baby is described as sleeping, they will expect him or her to wake up. If someone has gone away, there's an expectation that they will return. If a much wanted and loved baby has gone to heaven, it is not unusual for a child to also want to go to heaven as they want to be where their baby brother or sister is. Telling a child that their baby sister or brother has died will also require an explanation of death – many experts recommend explaining it simply and truthfully: “when a person dies they stop breathing and their heart stops beating.”

For a child who has been eagerly awaiting the birth of their brother or sister, the loss of a baby is just as important and meaningful to them. They may not react or grieve in the same ways we do and it's important for us not to put our framework of grief on them and then wonder if there's something wrong because they are not...talking about it, crying all the time, acknowledging the baby, or they are off playing and don't seem perturbed or don't seem to be affected by the loss at all. It is important for us as parents and caregivers not to expect the same reactions of grief that we would expect from an adult. A child's response to the death of their brother / sister / cousin / neighbour will vary depending on their age, personality and their previous experience of death.

Involving children in family rituals and practices is a good way to help children to fully understand that someone has died. This is no different when a baby dies. Children may wish to see their little baby brother or sister and hold them. Of course it is up to you as parents to decide what is best for your children, knowing what their past experiences with death and grief have been, what their unique personalities are, and what support resources are available for them.

Bringing your baby home will often make sense to a young child. To them, they were expecting to see them at home and with very little experience or knowledge of death, it isn't a weird or unnatural practice.

Like any ritual, it's important to explain to children what you are doing and what they can expect. It's common for children to talk about the experience of meeting their deceased brother or sister (whether at home, in the hospital or at the funeral home) for days, weeks or months afterwards. Parents tell us of their children including their brother or sister in their play activities and talking about them and their experience of meeting them, holding them and farewelling them.

If you decide to bring your baby home and you have children, talk to them about your decision and the reasons why it feels right for you. Ask them how they feel about it. Talk to them, remind them that you love them. And go gently as you all farewell your precious baby together.

Families who brought their children home have shared photos and stories about their time together as a family. You may find it helpful to look at those and see how natural it can be for your children to see and hold their deceased baby sibling, and to be involved in funeral rituals.

Resources:

- Children's Grief Education Association: www.childgrief.org/childgrief.htm
- Skylight: www.skylight.org.nz
- NYU Child Study Center 'Children and Grief: What They Know, How They Feel, How to Help' by Robin F. Goodman PhD: http://www.aboutourkids.org/articles/children_grief_what_they_know_how_they_feel_how_help
- Michigan Network for Grieving Children: www.kidsgrief.org
- What's Happened to Baby? (A New Zealand book for children aged 3–7 years who had a baby die in their family): <http://www.skylight.org.nz/What+Happened+to+Baby%3F>



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For more answers to your questions about bringing stillborn and deceased babies home, go to <http://whenyourbabydies.com/q/>