

The Miscarriage Association



Acknowledging Pregnancy Loss

Talking to children about pregnancy loss

*“Is it called a miscarriage
because we miss the baby?”*

My recent miscarriage at 12 weeks was hard enough, but I'm finding it even harder to answer my son's questions about why Mummy's crying. Do you think I should say anything? What can I tell him? He's only 3 but he knows something's wrong.

Introduction

The purpose of this leaflet is to help you decide the best way for you to handle pregnancy loss with children¹. This may be as a parent, a relative, a neighbour, a teacher, or other professional. It has been prepared with the help of members of The Miscarriage Association.

What is right for one person is not necessarily right for another. We are all different in the way we react to crisis and loss, in how much we show our feelings and want or need to talk about significant things. Families, communities and cultures also vary in ideas about pregnancy and in beliefs about what to do when a pregnancy ends before it should. Children are different too: regardless of their age and stage of development, some are more enquiring and sensitive than others.

Should you tell children anything?

You may feel that some children are too young and that they don't need to be told. Or you may want to protect them from any distress and protect yourself from the additional burden of dealing with difficult explanations. If children are very young and don't know of your pregnancy, there may be no need for them to know, especially if you miscarried early in your pregnancy and the children experienced little disruption. Even if you think it is important to be open with children, you may feel you do not want to overload them with information that they are too young to understand.

Amy² did not tell her daughter, aged 2:

I thought she'd find it traumatic and didn't want to burden her ... I miscarried during the night while she was sleeping and had hospital appointments while she was in nursery... [She] saw me crying a lot in the weeks and months after the miscarriage. ... I'm sure she found it bewildering but how do you explain a miscarriage to a 2 year old?

1 To make this leaflet easier to read, we use the word "children" in the plural – although we know that many readers may have only one child or none. We also sometimes say "your children", "your pregnancy" and "your miscarriage", but some readers will be thinking about how to talk to other people's children rather than their own and some will not be talking about their own pregnancy. When we talk about "miscarriage", we include ectopic and molar pregnancy. Whatever your circumstances, we hope this leaflet will be helpful.

2 All names have been changed.

However, it is usually difficult to conceal everything from children and even though you may not have told them about the pregnancy, they may know something is wrong and react in some way. You may have been upset and unable to be as close as usual, or you may have been in hospital and away from home. Their routine might have changed.

Dawn wanted to protect her 21 month old son and did not tell him but:

... he must have picked up on the upset and distress. A few days after it happened he came up to me and said 'Oh no – baby's gone!' At the time this was the longest sentence he had ever uttered...

Rachel wondered whether she should have told her 4 year old son about her miscarriage:

... he is perceptive – he knew something was wrong although we showed no tears and did not discuss the subject in front of him – for a couple of days he was naughty at nursery ... Partly because his behaviour blip had settled down but mainly because I felt he didn't need to know, we didn't tell him.

If your children are aware that something is going on but don't know what, they may become confused and worried. Often the truth is less frightening than a child's fantasy. Fiona's children were 5 and 7 when she miscarried at ten weeks. Overwhelmed with her own feelings, she found it impossible to talk about it and told her children she was ill, which she later regretted. A counsellor suggested she told her children:

We answered their questions as simply and honestly as we could. The children seemed relieved. They didn't know why I was acting so strangely. Once we had talked, they had some understanding ... they were no longer afraid or upset by what was going on. ... Being open and talking to the children honestly has enriched our relationship and made us much closer as a family.

Deciding to tell the children

Some children will know about the pregnancy and will need to be told about the miscarriage. Even if they didn't know about the pregnancy, they may know something is wrong. They may have been with you when you miscarried and seen you in pain or bleeding heavily. They may worry that you are very ill and need a clear explanation of what is happening and reassurance that you are not going to die.

Jasmine's daughter, aged 2¹/₂, was very aware that a baby was coming and accompanied her mother to the twelve-week scan when it was discovered that there was no heartbeat:

It was a very stressful time for us all and she was involved in every stage. We talked openly about what had happened so that she could understand. Her reaction was to draw and paint lots of beautiful pictures to “help Mummy stop crying”. We named the baby ... and she still produces pictures from time to time and talks of [the baby]. We involve her when we light candles for the anniversary.

Belinda had to explain to her 7 year old son why, when she had gone to work as normal in the morning, by evening she was in hospital having an emergency operation for an ectopic pregnancy:

We didn't tell him it was a life-threatening situation, but that the baby had died and that Mummy needed an operation to make her better.

Children do not necessarily need to be protected from emotional events. Openly sharing the experience can help children learn how to cope with difficult things. Some parents say that miscarriage is part of their family history and that it is important for children to know. Many parents say their children are caring and supportive towards them.

Children's resilience and support can be very helpful at a time of such grief. They need to learn that death is a part of life and that life is a miracle and so precious. It has taught both my daughter and son [aged 7 and 4¹/₂] to be sensitive, emotional and protective towards me and others... Children have the ability to bounce back and recover very quickly, providing they are loved and protected. They won't become fearful if knowledge is provided in the right way. (Gillian)

We have learned a lot from sharing with [our daughter, aged 3]. We have found that it is much more healing for us and her to be open and honest about how we feel, even if how we feel is wretched and sad. The only thing [she] finds difficult and upsetting is when she feels she is being lied to or she thinks she is being left out. (Rosie)

Why is it so difficult?

Even when you believe you should talk to your children about your miscarriage, it can be very difficult to balance their needs with your own, as the following comments show:

I must admit it was so hard to know what to say to them. I was so devastated it was hard to find the strength to try to appear normal for them and not to reject them. (Tracy)

It is very hard explaining and finding the right words when your own emotions are in turmoil. (Caroline)

Explaining pregnancy loss to children is complicated for all sorts of different reasons to do with you, the children and the nature of pregnancy loss.

Miscarriage is unexpected and can be physically traumatic. It is usually very distressing and you may be worried about your children seeing you upset or frightened. You may be focused on your own needs and unable to cope with explaining difficult things to your children. Their reactions may be very different to your own; children are often very practical and can quickly switch from being upset to playing happily. It's hard to explain because there often isn't an explanation or anything to see and there is nothing you can do. It may be the first difficult thing parents have had to deal with. Miscarriage is about life and death and may challenge your beliefs. You may be unsure how children will react and what they will understand.

Children's understanding develops as they mature

Talking to children about pregnancy loss means talking about death, which is often difficult for children to understand. Many children under 5 will have an awareness of death and by 8 or 9, most children will have a reasonably full understanding. Teenagers will think about death like an adult.

Very young children are likely to pick up on the feelings of the adults around them, but will not fully understand. They will be more sensitive to the changes in routine or separation from their mother that pregnancy loss may involve.

As they mature, children will begin to think about what dead people look like, where they are, what they can do, why people die and the finality of death. Children's comments and questions often reflect these elements and will be part of their attempts to make sense of death. Children often ask *Where has the baby gone? When will the baby come back?* Children may compare the death of the baby, if that is how it is explained, to the death of, say, a grandparent.

What do I say?

Miscarriage Association members have told us of the different ways they explained pregnancy loss to children. Some examples are:

I said [to my 3 year old] that there was something wrong with the baby which meant it wasn't growing and so it died. She brought me flowers in the hospital. She didn't seem too upset about it but would talk about the baby dying now and then. (Mary)

We told him [4 year old] that the baby was not strong enough to grow big and come out of Mum's tummy like he did. (Lois)

We explained to her that sometimes for no reason and through nobody's fault babies can die. (Isobel)

I told [my daughter, aged 3¹/₂] that sometime these things happen for no reason at all, that it was just not meant to be. I also told her that Mummy found it hard to make babies stay in her tummy and that I was extremely lucky to have her, and that she was a very special little girl. She told me not to worry and that I could try once more and that if it went wrong again we could buy a dog! (Nazma)

Parents have told us that when telling children about a miscarriage they say the baby died, or was ill and wasn't strong enough to live; the baby hadn't grown properly; or the baby couldn't stay in Mummy's tummy. Others compare a miscarriage to planting seeds, saying that only some grow into healthy plants.

If you have a faith, your beliefs may guide you in what to say. Even people without a particular faith sometimes use explanations which they think a child will understand, such as "the baby has gone to heaven".

It is usually best to be honest, to use simple language and to keep to straightforward clear explanations: "lost" to a young child can mean mislaid and make them worry that they will get "lost" too; saying the baby has fallen asleep may make a child frightened of falling asleep. Explanations should be geared to the age of the child and their questions answered at their own pace and as best you can. They need to know it's not their fault, even if they were not that keen on having a baby brother or sister.

When Orla, a teacher, was off school, her class of 6 to 7 year olds was told of her pregnancy. On her return she was in two minds, but she felt she had to explain:

'I very simply explained that ... I had been pregnant but I was not pregnant anymore because the baby had died inside me. I explained that I was very sad about it and hoped I would have another baby one day. I explained that I didn't know why it had happened – as we don't always know why babies die – and that was about it. The children ... were sympathetic and said they thought it was sad. A few spoke about the babies their mothers had lost in their tummies also ... The caring and understanding response of the children ... and later the responses of a few mothers ... made me feel it was the right decision [to tell them].

Children may stop asking questions quite quickly while others continue asking questions for some time, coming back to it when you least expect it, as Pauline found:

The girls often refer to these tiny babies at the most unusual times – and I am taken by surprise. However I have to try and remember to respond in a way that will not put the girls off talking about these babies, that it does not become an unmentionable subject. ... I only hope that the children know that when things go wrong, that you can be sad, you will get through to the other side, and they can talk about anything, they can express their thoughts and feelings openly.

How will they react?

Just as parents' reactions to pregnancy loss differ, so do children's. Some children will carry on as usual as if nothing out of the ordinary has happened. Elizabeth described her young brother's acceptance of her losses:

My brother [aged 8] has never been disturbed by my miscarriages. He understands it's a natural part of life and I believe this is because he's never been shut out. He is part of the family and miscarriage is common in family life.

Pauline commented on the difference between her older and younger children:

I described it as "the baby grew still". I later read these words in my 6 year old's school diary. She cried when told, [whereas] the younger two [aged 4 and 2] showed no obvious upset. A few days later my 4 year old answered questions from a friend about the 'baby' – they chatted and played in a relaxed manner.

Sabia's children were more distressed:

I told my children [aged 5 and 6] and they were very upset. My daughter ... still keeps on asking me when I am going to have a baby. I tell her that it died. She says 'I didn't want it to die, Mummy'. I tell her it was God's way. I also say I am going to try again.

Some children are not upset themselves, but react to their parents' distress. Fiona noticed this with her three children, aged 7, 4 and 2:

There were no tears (not from them anyway) but they were very saddened, concerned for me really. I think they saw it as more my loss than theirs.

Many children will react to changes in routine and separation from their mother, as well as to the pregnancy loss itself. It is not unusual for young children to be "naughty", to have tantrums or disturbed sleep, or to become more clingy and it can be very difficult to deal with this kind of behaviour when you yourself are at a low ebb.

Kate did not know whether her daughter's dramatic changes in behaviour were toddler tantrums or a reaction to her ectopic pregnancy:

She came to the hospital and saw me in a traumatised state, which upset her, as did the tubes and drips. [She] changed from being a quiet, passive and co-operative child to being one prone to the most unbelievable tantrums and hitting me.

Some children's reactions may come later than you expect, as Helen found:

My daughter [aged 3] whilst not appearing to react much at the time, started to have nightmares a few months later, that continued for three or four months – and these often featured death or dying. We helped her through it by being honest again and answering questions directly – as well as giving her a lot of comfort (and buying a family bed big enough for all of us to sleep in when either of the children wanted to).

Older children may struggle to make sense of the miscarriage and have many questions. The more they grasp of the immensity of what has happened, the more questions they may have. Vicky's eldest daughter, aged 11, was very upset about her mother's miscarriage:

[She] was asking "Why has it happened?" ... I tried my hardest to explain to her that things like this happen to a lot of women and there was nothing I could do to prevent it from happening.

Children often use play to act out experiences and feelings. While this may help them make sense of what has happened, it might increase parents' distress, as Sarah describes:

[Our daughter aged 3¹/₂] ... liked playing a game where she put a teddy under her jumper and said she needed a doctor because she had a baby in her tummy making her sick. The doctor came and took the baby out of her tummy and made her all better. I found this very upsetting.

Talking about miscarriage may prompt discussions about other issues, such as the reasons for adoption or being an only child. Caroline's 4 year old son found it hard to understand how some pregnancies survive while others don't:

He asked if he was adopted because we had a baby die and he didn't die, so he didn't believe he came from us.

Understanding about miscarriage may make children fearful that another pregnancy will end in miscarriage. Some parents avoid telling their children about a subsequent pregnancy at least until they have passed a certain critical stage. This may be to protect them against anxiety or disappointment, but it may also be a way of managing their own anxiety. It can be difficult to balance the needs of both parents and children at this time.

Things which might help

If you mark the pregnancy and the loss of the baby in some way, it may be helpful to involve the children. With a loss later in pregnancy there may be a baby to see and a funeral to attend and perhaps a place to visit. This can provide a focus for questions and discussion – and in Yvonne’s case, for a bit of clarification:

My son, now 4¹/₂, has always accompanied us to the grave of his older brother whom we lost 23 weeks into the pregnancy. He is intensely curious and likes to ask questions about death and sometimes appears almost obsessed by it. He is interested in the practical aspects and where you go after death and talks of his brother being in heaven. He also knows that his brother died whilst in my tummy but I’m not sure he really understands. He appears to be proud of having a brother and tells people about him and puts things on his headstone. We found recently that he had thought his brother was a stone and that took a lot of explaining.

It can be harder to mark an earlier miscarriage but some parents find naming the baby makes it easier to talk about. Some create a memorial book which they can share with their child or plant a special tree or shrub. One parent mentioned releasing a helium balloon, so the family could say goodbye and others shared different ideas:

My children each have an early scan photograph of the baby taken at an early scan. They look at it often and say that it makes them feel better. (Vicky)

We told [our 3 year old] that [the baby] had gone to be a twinkle star and that ... we would be able to see and talk to her when we needed to. She still regularly looks up at the dark night sky and talks to the stars. (Diane)

In summary

There is no simple answer to what to say or do with children when you miscarry. You need to think what is right for you and your children. We hope that the personal accounts in this leaflet may have given you some ideas of what to say and some preparation for how the children you are talking to may react.

In general, it is likely to help if you:

- think about each child – his/her age, understanding and approach to questions
- use simple language and straightforward explanations
- respond to the children’s questions and pick up on their worries
- are honest – it’s usually best
- reassure children that the miscarriage is not their fault
- accept that they may think about it differently from adults
- respect their ability to understand and the support they may have to offer

Further help

If you are worried about your child/ren's reactions after a miscarriage, it may be helpful to talk to their teacher, your Health Visitor or your GP. They may be able to refer you to a child psychologist if this seems appropriate.

Further information

You may find some of the following books helpful:

For children:

Molly's Rosebush

By Janice Cohn and Kathy Tucker

Published by Albert Whitman & Co., 1994. ISBN: 0807552135

A gentle, honest story about Molly, whose mother suffers a miscarriage. In an introduction, Cohn talks to parents about how children are affected by such a loss, how it should be explained to them, what their reactions may be, and how to determine if professional help is needed. Ages 4-8.

Daisy and the Egg

by Jane Simmons

Published by Orchard Books, 2001. ISBN: 184121826X

Daisy the duckling is very worried when her mother's egg doesn't hatch, but eventually her little brother arrives safely. A board book suitable for 2-4 year olds, which might help explain the anxieties around threatened miscarriage or other uncertainties in pregnancy.

The Velveteen Rabbit

by Marjory Williams and William Nicholson

Originally published in 1922

Newly published by Egmont Books (October 2004). ISBN: 1405210540

A story about a toy rabbit who learns about what it is to be real – a sensitive and moving story for children, parents and teachers

Water Bugs and dragonflies: explaining death to young children

by Doris Stickney

Published by The Pilgrim Press, 1997. ISBN: 082981180X

This children's book explains the Christian belief of life after death through a story about the lifecycle of water bugs and dragonflies. Suitable for under-7s.

Remembering Michael

by Anita Harper

Published by SANDS, 1994 (Tel: 020 7436 5881)

A story about a family where a baby brother dies at birth, with a focus on stillbirth or neonatal death.

Sad isn't bad

by Michaelene Mundy

Published by Abbey Press, 1998. ISBN: 0870293214

Described as a good-grief guidebook for kids, this book aims to help children accept grief as a normal and healthy process when someone close dies.

The huge bag of worries

By Virginia Ironside

Published by Hodder Wayland, 1996. ISBN: 0750021241

A story about a little girl who finds she is carrying an ever-growing bag of worries. Some people seem to have too many of their own worries to listen to hers, but once she finds someone to talk to, she finds help through sharing her worries and working out how to deal with them.

For adults and children:

Michael Rosen's Sad Book

by Michael Rosen, illustrated by Quentin Blake

Published by Walker Books, 2004. ISBN: 0744598982

In this beautifully written and moving book, Michael Rosen writes about his feelings following the death of his teenage son from meningitis. He talks about his sadness, how it affects him and some of the things he does to try to cope with it. An excellent book to help children – and adults – understand the experience of grief and depression.

For adults:

Helping children cope with grief

by Rosemary Wells

Published by Sheldon Press, 1988. ISBN: 085969559X

A book for adults who want to help children avoid the long-term distress which can be caused by hidden fears and anxieties.

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