

Supporting you through
difficult family times

Talking to Children

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Introduction

Parents who end a pregnancy because a condition or fetal anomaly is diagnosed in their baby experience a particular kind of grief and loss. The loss rests upon a decision you have taken, which can make this extremely difficult to talk about. Parents often worry a great deal about how and what to tell their other children.

The decision to end the pregnancy may have been made with your other children in mind, but the decision belongs to you and is part of your story, not theirs. Your children do not need to know all the details of what happened.

Ending a wanted pregnancy is always going to be emotionally painful and some women experience very intense and complicated grief emotions. Partners may not grieve in the same way and may feel differently about what has happened and the questions it raises. Whatever your differences, it is important that both of you agree what you are going to tell your children and how you approach the subject. This booklet discusses some of the things you might want to consider.

Talking to children about the loss

Choosing what and when to tell your children about a termination for fetal anomaly will depend on what you wish them to know, as well as their age and maturity. It will also depend partly on how much they understand about pregnancy and reproduction.

No-one can give you the right words and all situations are different. Most parents tend to begin with a simple explanation; that the baby was very poorly, that the baby didn't grow as it should and that sadly the baby died.

You will need to think about how much you want your children to know. They don't need to know everything. The fact that you ended the pregnancy is really only relevant to you and your partner.

Once you have started the discussion, you will need to be prepared for the questions your child may ask. You will be able to anticipate some of their responses, but they may still ask some unexpected questions. It may help children if you can talk about the way that you are feeling and explain this a little so that they can understand.

While you may be ready to talk to them, children have their own needs and interests and may not want to talk about this much, if at all. All children react differently and it is best to let them set the pace about how much they want to hear and discuss. Remember that what you choose to tell your child at first will influence how you can develop their understanding of what has happened over the years to come.

Telling children appropriately

It is important that what you tell children makes sense to them. Younger children use language very literally and often do not understand adult terms like 'lost' or 'gone to sleep'. They may become frightened that the same thing could happen to them. Some parents have described the baby as having gone on a journey, or to join a relative who has died; they have later found that the child thinks they can go on this journey too, and come back. They may ask when the dead person will return, which can be very distressing for everyone. It is hard to explain death to smaller children, although they often understand much more than we imagine.

However you tell your child, it is important that this fits in with the way you normally talk and the cultural and religious beliefs they are familiar with, or which you wish them to learn. Small children can become frightened by doctors or religious figures if they think they have 'taken' the baby. Remember that stories that seem comforting to you may confuse your child, so be clear about what you mean. It is important to be honest and answer their questions truthfully.

Children's reactions

A common childhood reaction to death is a fear that they may die too. This can also happen after a termination for anomaly, although it will depend on how you explain what has happened, and how aware your child was of the expected baby. Children may be very concerned about their own health and well-being. You may be very anxious about them and children may feel this concern. It is important that you let them know they are not in any danger and make clear decisions about how to discuss any genetic issues with them at an appropriate time.

Children can sometimes be quick to blame themselves for things going wrong. They may have had feelings of jealousy about the expected baby and may feel guilty that their feelings caused the baby's death. Again, it is important to let them know that what happened was not their fault and that they are still very precious to you. Sometimes children want to talk, but are frightened of upsetting you – you might want to let them know that the baby can be talked about.

Considering your privacy

It is quite normal for children to talk about even very personal things with others. Parents often choose carefully who they tell about the termination and how much. You might want to consider who your child is likely to talk to and make sure that what your child learns is in keeping with what you wish others to know. Asking a child to keep the termination secret may cause difficulties.

At the time of the termination

If you already have children they may be aware of your pregnancy. Sometimes, if the diagnosis was very early, they will not know that you are expecting a baby. How involved they are will be different in every family and will influence how you tell them about the termination. Even if they didn't know you were pregnant, they are likely to have picked up that something is not right and will sense that you are stressed or sad.

Younger children will probably understand little about your pregnancy, other than that you have said a baby is coming. They may be satisfied with your explanations that the baby is not coming after all, although they may be concerned for their own well-being, and have guilty feelings. Sometimes younger children are very angry that the promised brother or sister is not to be and this may be hard to accept. Some children find their own comforting explanations about what has happened, which you may need to accept and develop over time. Other children may have a reaction of shock and grief; this will depend upon what your pregnancy has meant to them. The trauma you have been through, and your own feelings, will have an effect on the wider family. Children may regress physically and emotionally. Security and maintaining their usual routine will help to contain their anxieties about themselves, and for you, and will help them to recover.

It might help if you can make anyone else who cares for your children aware of the situation – at school, playgroup or a childminder. If your children's behaviour causes concern, don't be afraid to ask your school, doctor or health visitor for help.

Your difficulties with younger children may be more immediate and practical – preparing them if you face a stay in hospital and caring for them on an everyday basis after you come home. You may feel very distant from them, or desperately protective.

Whether you want to involve younger children in a memorial service or funeral will depend on your own circumstances. Some children like to participate in choices around names and ceremonies. Again there are no right or wrong answers. It may help if you have a tangible memory of the baby they can share, for example a name, a book of cards and letters from friends and relatives, or a special tree or bush in the garden.

Older children are likely to have been more involved in your pregnancy and may need more detailed explanations about what is happening. They may ask lots of questions. They may also feel very distressed at the loss of the baby. It will help if you can share your sadness together. Many parents find it helpful to involve older children in remembrance of the baby and at the funeral or memorial service. This can help to focus their grief as well as your own, but if they prefer not to, you should accept this.

Adolescents have their own values and beliefs; they may have strong opinions about the morality of terminations, which may be difficult for you. Sometimes older children and teenagers feel very awkward and embarrassed around adult events. Allowing them to deal with their feelings in their own way is important. Talking about their feelings and fears can help. Try to respond to what they need, rather than assuming that their needs are the same as yours. Again, it can help to let teachers or club leaders etc know what has happened so that they can offer support to your child too. Older children often prefer to talk over their problems with people outside the immediate family.

Telling children in later years

If the termination occurred in your first pregnancy, or when other children were very young, you may find yourself telling them about something that happened before they were born, or when they were very small. How and when you do this is up to you, and depends upon how much you want to discuss. Secrets within a family can be difficult for children, who may detect there is something they do not know about. However there is a difference between privacy and a secret and you don't have to tell unless you feel comfortable doing this.

Some parents have said that they keep a photograph of their baby and are waiting for their children to ask who the baby is before they tell them about the termination. There is nothing wrong with this kind of approach, but you should be aware that questions may come at any time; you may not be prepared, or it may be inappropriate. In cases like this you might want to have your general explanation ready.

From time to time TV programmes cover stories about antenatal testing and making decisions about a pregnancy after a prenatal diagnosis. Some parents have taken this opportunity to discuss what happened to them, or to make decisions about telling their own children based on their reactions to what they have seen. Other parents simply choose an age or time when they think a child is ready to understand.

Younger children

When telling a younger child about an earlier termination, it can be a good idea to have dolls or drawing materials available. Sometimes smaller children respond by drawing a picture of a baby, or acting out something they have learned with dolls. This is quite normal and a safe way for them to express their feelings. Younger children are likely to accept what you have told them in a very matter-of-fact way and may not have strong reactions. If they can accept the story and find a place for it in their understanding of the family, then both you and they will have achieved something positive. Your child may react strongly. Talking about their concerns and worries, which are likely to be for themselves, as well as sharing your memories, will help to find a place for these feelings.

Older children

Older children and teenagers are likely to react differently from younger ones, as they will have a different understanding of the implications. They may have lots of questions about why it happened and what it means for them. They may have far stronger fantasies about what having the baby would have meant, and again, sharing your memories and talking about these can help. This may be painful for you. You might want to consider teenagers' sometimes very absolute moral values around terminations when preparing what you want to tell them.

You may have waited until your children are older because there is a genetic issue that may affect them. They will probably be more concerned about these questions than younger children and you might want to concentrate on reassuring explanations, whilst being honest about the implications for them.

Genetic and hereditary issues

If there is a genetic or hereditary concern you will probably have thought a great deal about telling your children about this. In recent years a lot of guidance has been developed for families about appropriate ways and times to discuss these issues. Many different organisations deal with inherited conditions and can give you advice and support. If you are not already in contact with the relevant organisation, ARC can help you to find them.

A genetic counsellor can also help with this. Your hospital doctor or GP can refer you to your regional genetics service for this.

For yourself

- Take your time with how, what and when you tell your children. You need to feel ready to cope.
- Contact the ARC Helpline (0207 713 7486) if you would like to talk through these issues, or would like to be in touch with other parents.

For children

- Maintain their usual routines as far as you can.
- Let other carers know about the situation.
- Use language they can understand; be clear and consistent, but don't try to tell them too much.
- Let them set the pace, but don't let them go on avoiding the issue indefinitely.
- Encourage them to talk about their feelings and listen carefully to what they say.
- It may be useful to share your own difficulty in understanding some of the complex issues and the reasons for what has happened.
- Share your feelings and cares together, without burdening children with your grief.
- Don't just talk about this once.
- Like your own, children's thoughts and worries change with time and experience.
- Share memories of your baby.

Other useful organisations

The organisations below also have information about talking to children about the loss of a baby available on their websites.

Child Bereavement UK

Child Bereavement UK supports families and educates professionals when a baby or child of any age dies or is dying, or when a child is facing bereavement.

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org>

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/telling-a-child-that-someone-has-died>

SANDS

Sands supports anyone who has been affected by the death of a baby before, during or shortly after birth.

<https://www.sands.org.uk>

<https://www.sands.org.uk/support/bereavement-support/sands-supporting-children>

Miscarriage Association

The Miscarriage Association supports people affected by miscarriage and ectopic and molar pregnancies.

<https://www.miscarriageassociation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Talking-to-Children.pdf>

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Need help?

Call our national helpline and speak to a member of our trained team.
Our helpline is open Monday to Friday, 10.00am-5.30pm.

Helpline: 020 7713 7486

ARC

12-15 Crawford Mews,
York Street, London
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**Antenatal
Results &
Choices**

arc-uk.org
Helpline 020 7713 7486