



to family
and friends:
You can make
a difference



A booklet by parents whose baby or young child
has died suddenly and unexpectedly.

SIDSaustralia

NATIONAL SIDS COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA LTD

“It’s now almost four months since Zoë died. From the dreaded morning I found her in her cot, people have been generous, courageous, considerate and, happily, their normal selves. I am thankful in my heart for all the thoughts and efforts, from the meals in the first weeks and the phone calls to see how we’re doing, to the unfussed acceptance of my crying at parties and gatherings, the remembrances of Zoë on her first birthday and the sheer bravery of just sitting with me as I go mad.

Every little bit that family and friends do is vital for us, is much-needed support. I couldn’t go on without it.”

Joanna

Zoë, 3.2.91 – 15.10.91



Introduction

Your understanding and support will make a difference.

To *every* family, the sudden unexpected death of a baby or young child is devastating. The family's world is turned upside down. They may feel angry, confused, hurt – and alone. Your support, caring and friendship are so important during this time.

Death is a difficult subject, one which is frightening and unfamiliar to many people. Sometimes it is hard to know what to do or say to someone whose young child has died. You may feel awkward, uncomfortable or even afraid. But don't let your own sense of helplessness keep you away. Silence and distance can be so hurtful, not only to the parents, but also to you and your relationship with them.

As you cared about your friend or family member before the death of their child, show them, in some way, that you still do. Your understanding and support *will* make a difference.

Three important things to know:

1. People do recover from such a tragic loss eventually, but they will be changed by it and they will never forget.
2. The greatest help for parents on the long road to self-healing and recovery is the understanding and support of their family and friends.
3. It is easy to make a mistake or say the wrong thing in trying to support a grieving friend. But it is never too late to say you are sorry.

This booklet is designed to give you some guidelines about how you can help your friend or family member – **because your help is vital.**

Six or eight weeks later...

Ask, *“How are you going now?”*

Listen. Be patient and listen – your friend or family member may want to go over and over what happened.

Be sensitive to your friend or family member’s wish either to talk or not talk about their child.

Use the baby or young child’s name and be ready to share memories.

Don’t feel personally rejected by your friend or family member’s extreme moods. Try another time; there will be good days and bad days.

Finally...

Find your own way to help your friend or family member. There are many ways of showing ordinary human kindness, so do keep trying, tactfully and gently.

It's alright to show your emotions – you can be honest with your feelings.

Make sure you have support for yourself; supporting your friend may not be easy.

By reading this booklet, you are already showing that you care and want to do your best to support your friend or family member.

The following pages go into more detail about how your friend or family member might be feeling, and what you can do to support them. We hope that the suggestions in this booklet will give you some confidence in your ability to be helpful.



Listening and trying to understand...

One of the most important things that you can do for a friend or family member whose child has died is simply to listen. Some parents feel the need to go over and over what happened, and need someone who is willing to listen to them. Sometimes, with the best of intentions, friends or family members try to change the subject when the parents begin talking about their dead child. While you may think it will be helpful to try to get their minds off their child, it usually isn't.

Some parents feel more comfortable not talking about their dead child, but may still need someone just to be there with them. So try to accept silence, too. Be aware, though, that your friend or family member may change their mind, and may want to talk about their child at some other time.

Every experience is unique, and every person experiences a unique grieving process. While their behaviour may seem strange to you – for example, if they cry constantly, even long after the death, or if they rarely, if ever, cry – try to accept it as a part of their grieving process. Do not be surprised at the things parents may do. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, and anything that comforts parents is normal. Try not to say things like, *“You ought to be feeling better by now”* – people heal in their own time.

“Of all the remarks made at the time of my son’s death to comfort me, my friend who said ‘I cannot imagine how you must be feeling’ came the closest to acknowledging my unique pain.”

Louise

Luke, 17.2.90 – 29.6.90

Support for the grieving family

Fathers grieve, too

When a baby or young child dies, it is generally accepted that mothers will grieve. But it is not widely accepted that fathers will grieve, too. They will be deeply hurt, though some may not show their grief as openly as do mothers. Fathers need friendship and support; they need to be allowed to talk about their child if they wish, and they need to know that you care. In fact, they need all the same sorts of support that mothers need. Try not to say things like, “*How is your wife doing?*” without also asking how *he* is doing. Almost everything that you think to do in support of a mother whose child has died will also be appreciated by the father.

Brothers and sisters

When a baby or young child dies, it is important to remember that the child’s brothers and sisters will be grieving. They too will experience the pain of grief, but they will express it in different ways. For example, they may be unusually clinging or anxious, may have nightmares, or may **appear** unaffected. They will have questions, and their own fears.

Sometimes parents may appear uninterested in their other children for a time, or simply do not have the energy to give them the attention they need. If you can, try to give special attention to the child’s brothers and sisters. This will be helpful both to the children and to the parents.

Practical matters

Some of the things you can do to help.

- Washing clothes (ask before you wash any of the baby or young child's clothes).
- Washing dishes (ask before you wash any of the baby or young child's bottles or dishes).
- Tidying up around the house (but leave the nursery untouched).
- Preparing meals for the rest of the family (the parents may not want to each much at first).
- Looking after the other children.
- Grocery shopping.
- Answering the phone and greeting visitors.
- Making phone calls that may be difficult for your friend or family member, such as notifying distant relatives or notifying the Social Security office regarding Family Allowance.
- Helping to answer correspondence.
- Driving your friend or family member to places they need to go.
- Mowing the lawn or taking care of the garden.
- Feeding the pets.

“Not long after Franklin died I came home to find someone had left a cake at the door. This meant that someone had thought of us and had acted upon this.”

Erica
Franklin, 10.2.89 – 21.7.89

Making decisions

After the death of a child, some parents feel inadequate or helpless. It is tempting to want to make decisions for them, so that they do not have to worry. But if you take over their decision-making, you may inadvertently make them feel even more helpless. Many parents have said that they wished they had taken a more active part in their baby or young child's funeral, for example. Even if you do not agree with their decisions, try to accept them as the right ones for the parents at that time.

In addition to funeral arrangements, the decision of if and when to put away the baby or young child's clothing, pictures and toys must be that of the parents. They need to decide what to do with these things in their own time. Sometimes the father and mother do not agree; it is important that you do not take sides, but try to understand how each person feels.

If the parents are feeling overwhelmed or frustrated, try to encourage them to be patient with themselves and not to expect too much of themselves. If you are there for them, they may feel more capable just knowing that someone cares and will help if needed.

Some special issues

Guilt and self-blame

In some circumstances of death, parents may blame themselves for the death of their child. Listen to them without making any judgements. You might try to reassure them that what happened was not their intention. You might speak about their loving care for their child and whatever else you know to be true and positive about their devotion to their baby or young child. But be prepared to listen to their doubts and fears as well.

With Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), the causes are still not known. We have learned over the years, though, that there are some things that do *not* cause SIDS. Many parents feel responsible in some way for the death of their baby or young child. They mistakenly believe that something they did, or did not do, or even their ignorance or neglect, somehow contributed to the death. Although this is a natural reaction, any such guilt is unfounded.

Other children of similar age

If you have a baby or young child about the same age as the child who died, ask your friend or family member how they feel about seeing your child. Some may want to cuddle and nurse your child, while others may not want to see a child at all. If they do not want to see your baby or young child at one particular time, understand that they may change their mind later.



Then there are those, the blessed ones,
who say in so many ways
the only thing I need to hear.

“I am so sorry, David.”
“I am with you, David.”

The ones who, even five weeks later,
ask gently, as if for the first time:

“How are you today?”
“How are you doing now?”

These bring tears to my eyes.
These you could not buy with gold.

From the poem entitled “Michael” By David Morawetz
Michael, 4.3.85 – 18.4.85

(Published in the United States as “Go Gently – A Parent’s Grief”
Centering Corporation 1991)

Other support

Suggested reading

A range of books, newsletters, research and articles on grief, tapes, brochures, and videotapes, are available on loan from local SIDS organisations. Subjects covered include factual information about the sudden and unexpected death of a child, SIDS, the impact of the sudden death of a child on the family and the community, how to cope with children's reactions, having another baby or young child, research and various support services.

Publications available from your local SIDS office or the SIDS office in your area.

Always your child.

Choices in arranging a child's funeral.

For SIDS families: some answers to your questions.

Grandparent to grandparent.

Things about Zac, my baby brother.

Another baby? The decision is yours.

Other support organisations

For further assistance, you might like to look up the following associations in your phone book:

The Compassionate Friends
(for those who survive their child/ren).

SANDS Australia (Stillbirth And Neonatal Death Support).

NALAG (National Association for Loss and Grief).



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NOSE
DAY