Helping Bereaved Parents Support Their Children

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Children and Grief

A child can live through anything, so long as he or she is told the truth and is allowed to share with loved ones the natural feelings people have when they are suffering.
~ Eda LeShan

Overview

- Perinatal loss can impact siblings alive at the time of loss and those that follow.
- Siblings suffer two losses:
  - The baby they were expecting
  - The parents they knew before the loss.
Learning objectives

- Identify two themes mothers and fathers experience when an infant dies that alters parenting behaviors
- Gain knowledge in identifying children's behavioral responses to grief and loss may show based on their developmental age
- Learn supportive techniques for guiding parents to help children process their grief and keep the deceased baby a member of the family
- Describe the concept of "protective parenting" in bereaved mothers and fathers and behaviors one might have during pregnancy, early postpartum and beyond

Historical perspective

In 1916 Sophia Fahs, a Unitarian educator, editor, author and minister, with a special interest in the religious education of children, wrote an article for Parent Magazine titled, "What are our children’s thoughts about death?" She describes a scene in her home after her baby daughter Gertrude had died. Her other three children were all under four years of age.
“Before the funeral, a special service was held for the three other children in the family and for those of their child friends who cared to come. In a bassinet draped with white dotted Swiss over which were twined sweet peas, the baby’s body lay. Simply and kindly the pastor talked and prayed with the little group of hushed children, and together they sang a child’s song.”

Why Include the Children

Before the baby had come into the world, the sisters and brother had shared the joyous knowledge of her expected birth, and after she went, they shared also with their parents the trust that all was well with the child” (Hunter, pp 91-92).

What has changed

- Funeral homes took over
- Parents no longer prepared the body
- Bodies moved from being buried on family property
Children’s perspective

- The parent they knew before the loss
- The sibling they were expecting
- Loss of security
- Loss of innocence
- May have a sense of guilt
- Will I die too?
- Loss of attention
- Loss of normality with the disruption of their home life

Children’s Losses

- Siblings Alive at the time of Loss

- The parent they knew before the loss
- The sibling they were expecting
- Loss of security
- Loss of innocence
- May have a sense of guilt
- Will I die too?
- Loss of attention
- Loss of normality with the disruption of their home life
Telling a Child at the Time of Loss

- Children understand grief within developmental stages
- Parents want to believe children are too young to understand
  Consider the child's developmental level and prior experiences in explaining the loss
- Parents need to share why they are sad and be okay crying with them and in front of them

A child's grief will change and evolve as their concept and understanding of death improves and personal experiences with death increase.

There are three components that are involved in a child's understanding of death:
1. Non-functionality: the fact that once something dies, all physical functions cease
2. Irreversibility: something that has died cannot come back to life
3. Universality: all living things will eventually die

Developmental Stages

Ages, stages, and loss
Why tell the children

• They saw mommy's tummy getting big. They needed to know the baby didn't just go away
• Learn early that we don't always have control of life

"I remember lots of the miscarriages as a toddler/preschooler and my Mom often feeling sad and alone. I was frightened and often overwhelmed. I still need to hear that what happened was not my fault and I couldn't fix it or make my Mom feel better. " ~ Quote from 40 yr. old woman

Prenatal

• Emotions of mother affects the unborn child.
• Does the unborn child sense emotions and what does this mean for later development?

Helping Pre-schoolers:
Discuss death in simple & direct terms

• The baby was too small to live outside of mommy
• The body stopped working
• It has a specific cause
• It is irreversible
• Reassurance they are still safe
• Keep activities as routine as possible
• Magical thinking: "We thought it was our fault that Freddie died."
Developmental Stages: 2-4 year olds

- Have a limited concept of what death is, but are still aware that the person is missing.
- It is best to use the word "dead" when answering. Even though the child may not yet fully understand what "dead" means, he or she will begin to differentiate it from such things as "sleeping" or "gone."
- Explain that when someone has died they cannot talk, walk, feel, or breathe anymore.
- Believe that someone that is dead can come back to life—cartoons, videogames enforce this thought.
- Have an egocentric view of the world, and do not have the concept that they could die.

Challenge to Previous Slide

Children in families that have experienced a perinatal loss can have a very different view:

"Two or three other moms were pregnant at the same time in our neighborhood, and we were all due about the same time. When this friend of Hank's mom went to the hospital I remember Hank coming home and saying, 'Do you think that baby will live? Do you think that baby will come home?' And that's when I realized that these guys had lost their innocence with pregnancies. They knew that not all babies lived."

"Giving voice to an experience liberates it from disenfranchisement."

(Quote from Embracing Laura, Wegner-Hay, 1998)

Children who know the story and are given the words for what happened fair better. It is not a family secret.
Developmental Stages: 5-9 year olds

- Begin to have a more mature understanding of death, and understand more that when something dies, the physical functions cease.
- Begin to understand that once something dies, it cannot come back to life. See this with plants, animals, etc.

Developmental Stages: 5-9 year olds (cont’d)

- May still have a difficult time understanding death is universal, and may believe that only happens to “old” or “sick” people.
- May ask the same questions over and over again, and hope that the answer changes. However, having them answered over and over again will help them to understand more and more.
- May have the fear that someone else close to them is going to die next. It is important to reassure them that there will always be someone to take care of them.

For a Subsequent Child @ 5-9 y/o

Clearer Understanding of Missing Sibling

“Carol (age six) has started to ask more questions, just like her older brother did at that age, about the brother who died before they were born. It is definitely not as intense with her but interesting. She pretends his in the room. She told me that she does not miss him because he is with her. She also has told me that she does not think it is fair that I got to see him and she did not.”
The Subsequent Child
“The Rainbow Baby”

- Aware of its mother's grief, sadness and depression.
- Is there a spiritual component
  - Gain a sense of grief feelings during the pregnancy
  - Have a sense someone was in the space before them

Themes: Subsequent Child

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<th>Children under 17</th>
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<td>• Sensitivity/Nurturing to others</td>
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"Gifts"

Parenting Behaviors / Parenting Styles

Protective Parenting is Normal
They may worry about the safety of living children and not feel comfortable leaving them with others
Tentative Parenting
Attachment / Image of a Baby

During Pregnancy
- The time I’m telling people I’m pregnant not that I’m going to have a baby.
- You feel that movement, and I still don’t believe I’m having a baby even though I am showing.
- I didn’t want to become attached for fear of losing it again.

Postpartum
- Even since we’ve given birth I wasn’t convinced he would be alive in the morning, or that we would take a baby home.
- Every day I don’t know if I’m going to get another.
- The first two years I would never take the tags off the clothes for the next age. I would only use whatever we could for that moment.

Intentional Parenting

Pregnancy
- I savor every last second of the baby moving inside me... in the back of my mind, [this] may be the last time...
- Dad: “It’s probably one question I ask her the most, every time I talk to her during the day at work. ‘Is the baby moving?’”

Postpartum
- “With the two children that I keep here with me now, I pray in the back of my mind it is never going to be the best, but that I can possibly keep them alive.”
- “I have a lot more pressure to just pacify and keep going, and to just be there and not just be one of the parents.”
- “There is no way we can cut back, but what are we going to do? We’re only one with the kids because life is so short.”

Overprotective Parenting

Pregnancy
- “I am so afraid that something is going to happen and I’m not going to know it.”
- “It’s good to be able to feel movement a lot. Okay, the baby’s still there, the baby’s still there.”
- “I’m more involved; not just the support person, sleeping in the cot, sitting in the corner on a chair.”

Postpartum
- “We’re just so more guarded. In a second they could be gone. I think a lot of people talk about kids for granted and we don’t.”
- “Both of us make sure that all the safety rules are followed.”
What Parents and Professionals Can Do

- Teach healthy coping skills.
- Help children to develop and build his/her identity.
- Address potential and actual issues.
- Teach children how to grieve.
- Help children to ritualize loss.
- Allow children to grieve and express emotion.
- Develop strong support system.

“We cannot protect children from knowing death and from mourning by diverting their attention. Protection in this case involves giving them the tools to cope by educating and involving them.”

Phyllis Silverman. *Never Too Young to Know*

Discussion:
Life before and after sibling loss
References


References


Thank You

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