

Nicola Clifford

Helping Parents Deal with Loss

I have just returned from a three week trip to Sydney, the circumstances brought about by the news that my sister who resides there has just had a stillborn baby. This kind of sudden and unexpected death is a huge shock to any parent waiting to welcome a new baby into their family but as a society there is little guidance and information on the best way to support families through 'the worst thing that can happen'. Since my trip I have learned that for every baby who dies from cot death, there are 30 stillborn babies. As educators we have a duty to be as informed as possible about the helpful things to say to a grieving family and with the kind permission of my sister, I am able to share some of her milestone moments.

The first decision was how to tell my three year old nephew Felix about what had happened to 'baby sister', closely followed by telling his daycare teachers that the excited countdown to the 'big day' had ended with the worst possible outcome. We told Felix using direct but simple language that, "baby sister had died" and we avoided euphemisms such as 'she is an angel' or 'she had to go to heaven'. This avoids any unnecessary confusion and is the best possible foundation for future questioning.

Every family is different and their experience is unique. It is most helpful when supporting a family in this circumstance to ask them, "What kind of language are you using?" and to find out how much understanding the child has. We must be mindful not to project our beliefs into this scenario and avoid saying things like 'things happen for a reason' or 'she'll be waiting for you'. Thankfully the daycare teachers were able to gauge Felix's level of understanding very quickly and were prepared if he asked them any questions about baby sister.

This kind of loss happens in such a public way and it became quickly apparent that there was no longer a baby bump or a baby. My sister's friends who were pregnant expressed how guilty they felt that they were still pregnant and were unsure how to behave around my sister. Thankfully they were honest with her and she reassured them that she felt so happy for them and asked them not to act differently around her. Other people may respond differently and it is always best to be mindful of the parent dynamics in your class.

On the day that Xanthe should have been born we gathered in a park by the waterside to light lanterns and around 40 friends and family gathered to support my sister and her partner to acknowledge that their baby daughter existed. Everybody expressed how much they appreciated this opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings and photographs taken on the day will go into the memory box that my sister created for



Nicola with her Son, Flynn, at Pownall Hall School, Cheshire, shortly before he died in a head on car collision on the way to school.

Xanthe. It is worthy to note that other grievors may choose to isolate in this situation and this also applies to siblings or other family members such as grandparents. Siblings may display an inability to concentrate or focus in class and homework may not be completed on time (if at all). It is important to maintain contact with families during this time and be flexible about deadlines etc.

When I returned to work at Pownall Hall School, the compassion shown to me by my colleagues was gratefully received. It had been some short weeks earlier that 16 members of staff participated in my 'Helping Children Deal With Loss' course, little did I realise how much I myself would benefit from their training! Grief is afterall a normal and natural response to loss and it was lovely to be able to talk about my story without anyone 'running for the hills'. In the past I had felt the need to 'be strong for others' and I could have won an academy award for 'being fine', but I chose to be honest with my colleagues and say, "I am feeling rubbish today". This simple act of honesty saved much needed energy and brought much needed understanding and compassion •

Helpful tips when supporting parents

- Do not avoid a bereaved parent
- Express your concern with kindness and ask 'what happened?'
- Do say 'I want to support you however I can, what can I do?'
- Do say 'I cannot imagine how you feel'
- Never say 'I know how you feel' because every loss is unique
- Never say 'Will you try again? You can have another one'
- Allow as much time as you can for listening