



MISCARRIAGE
ASSOCIATION

The knowledge to help

Talking to children about miscarriage

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

This leaflet aims to help you to handle miscarriage with children¹.

We have written it mostly for parents, but we hope it will also be useful if you are a relative or friend, or if you work with children.

We are all different in the way we react to miscarriage – our own or someone else's. That might be just a personal reaction, but it might also be to do with the family, community or culture we come from.

You might be someone who shows your feelings or you might keep them hidden. You may want and need to talk about what's happened, but you may not. Or you might just find it very hard to find the right words, whoever you're talking to. That might feel like an additional burden at a difficult time.

Children are different too. Whatever their age and stage of development, some are more enquiring than others and ask lots of questions. Some may be particularly sensitive to how a parent or teacher is feeling.

“ My recent miscarriage was hard enough, but I'm finding it even harder to answer my son's questions about why Mummy's crying.

Should I say anything? What can I tell him? He's only 3 but he knows something's wrong. ”

¹ In this leaflet we use the word 'miscarriage' to cover all types of pregnancy loss, including ectopic and molar pregnancies.

We mostly use the word "children", though we know that you might have just one child or none. We also sometimes say "your children", "your pregnancy" and "your miscarriage", but these might not fit your particular circumstances. We hope you'll understand.

Should you tell children anything?

You may feel that your children are too young to be told about your miscarriage, as they just wouldn't understand. Perhaps they didn't know you were pregnant, so you feel there's no need for them to know about your loss. You might want to protect them from any upset.

But it's often difficult to hide everything from children. Even though you may not have told them about the pregnancy, they may know something is wrong and react in some way. You might have been upset, or you may have been in hospital and away from home. Their routine might have changed.

“ He knew something was wrong although we did not discuss the subject in front of him. For a couple of days he was naughty at nursery.

Partly because his behaviour settled down but mainly because I felt he didn't need to know, we didn't tell him.”

“ I didn't want to burden my daughter. I miscarried at night while she was sleeping and had hospital appointments while she was in nursery. She saw me crying a lot after the miscarriage.

I'm sure she found it bewildering but how do you explain a miscarriage to a 2 year old? ”

Deciding to tell the children

If your children knew about the pregnancy, you probably will need to tell them about your 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 reassurance that you are not going to die.

You may also need to reassure them that the miscarriage wasn't anyone's fault. They might think that they are somehow to blame, especially if they weren't happy about the idea of a new baby.

“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 don't necessarily need to be protected from emotional events.

If you talk about what happened, that can help them learn how to cope with difficult things. Many parents say their children are caring and supportive towards them.

If you work closely with children, you might decide to tell them, especially if they knew you were pregnant or wondered why you weren't at work.

“The children in my class, aged 6 and 7, were sympathetic. Their caring and understanding response, and later the responses of a few mothers, made me feel it was the right decision to tell them.”

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.

Miscarriage is usually very distressing and you may be worried about your children seeing you upset or frightened. You may be so upset that you can't cope with trying to explain what has happened.

Their reactions may be very different to yours. For example, children can quickly switch from being upset to playing happily. That can be hard for you to take. They may also want clear and practical explanations, but there often isn't an explanation or anything to see that can help them understand.

“ It is very hard explaining and finding the right words when your own emotions are in turmoil. ”

“ It was so hard to know what to say to them. I was so devastated that it was hard to find the strength to try to appear normal for them. ”

How do I know if they'll understand?

Talking to children about miscarriage means talking about death, which is often difficult for children to understand.

- Very young children are likely to pick up on the feelings of the adults around them, but will not fully understand.
- Many children under five will have some awareness of death, perhaps through the loss of a grandparent or a pet.

- By the age of eight or nine, most children will have a reasonably full understanding.
- Teenagers will think about death like an adult.

As they mature, children begin to think about what dead people look like, where they are, what they can do, why people die and the finality of death. They may ask questions to try to make sense of what's happened, like: *Where has the baby gone? When will the baby come back?*

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

What do I say?

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

“I said that there was something wrong with the baby which meant it wasn’t growing and so it died. She didn’t seem too upset about it but would talk about the baby dying now and then.”
[aged 3]

“We told him that the baby was not strong enough to grow big and come out of Mum’s tummy like he did.”
[aged 4]

“We explained to her that sometimes for no reason and through nobody’s fault, babies can die.”

“We said it’s like planting seeds – only some of them grow into healthy plants.”

“I told her 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.”
[aged 3½]

If you have a faith, that might guide you in what to say. Even people without a particular religion sometimes use explanations that 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. If you say “lost” to young children, they may think you mean “mislaid” and may worry that they will get “lost” too. If you say the baby has fallen asleep, they may become frightened of falling asleep.

How will they react?

Everyone reacts in their own way to miscarriage, children as well as adults. Your children may carry on as usual as if nothing out of the ordinary has happened. But they might be quite upset.

You might find that although they are not upset themselves, they react to your distress.

Your children may react to changes in their routine or to being separated from you, as well as to your miscarriage. It is not unusual for young children to be “naughty”, to have tantrums or disturbed sleep, or to become more clingy. It can be very difficult to deal with this kind of behaviour when you are feeling low yourself.

Older children may struggle to make sense of the miscarriage and have many questions. And you may find that they are asking the exact same questions that you have: *Why did the baby die? What could have caused it? Will it happen again?*

“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.”

If your children worry that you might have another miscarriage, you may wonder whether you should tell them if you become pregnant again. You may decide not to say anything for the first few months, just to protect them.

On the other hand, they may be quick to notice if you are off-colour or anxious in another pregnancy. Trying to keep things secret may be difficult for you and might even make them worry more. It can be hard to balance their needs and yours.

“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’.”

What else might help?

Books can sometimes help, whether you read out loud or your children read by themselves. They can prompt questions and also help answer them. See our suggestions on pages 10 and 11.

Writing You might decide to write a book or a story or poem yourself, perhaps with your children's help. That's what Gillian Griffiths did. Her book, *Goodbye Baby*, is at the top of our list.

Drawing Some children find it easiest to show how they feel by drawing or painting. They may make a drawing for the baby or for you and that might help them talk about their feelings – or yours.

Marking the loss It might feel right to remember the baby in some special way, for example:

- Giving the baby a name – that can make it easier to talk about him or her
- Making a memory book or memory box, with anything that's connected to your pregnancy and perhaps a drawing or small toy that your children make or choose

- Planting a tree or shrub, in your garden or a container
- Releasing a helium balloon, to say goodbye to your baby

If you miscarried late in pregnancy, there may be a baby to see – and your children may be both curious and quite natural about this. There may be a funeral to attend and perhaps a place to visit. This can also be an opportunity for questions and discussion.

“My son, now 4½, has always accompanied us to the grave of his older brother whom we lost 23 weeks into the pregnancy. He knows that his brother died whilst in my tummy but I’m not sure he really understands.”

“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.”

“My daughter’s reaction was to draw and paint lots of beautiful pictures to “help Mummy stop crying”.”

Talking to children: a 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 this leaflet has 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

Sources of 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.

If you need to talk to someone, please contact us at

The Miscarriage Association

has a telephone helpline, a volunteer support service, an online support forum and a range of helpful leaflets.

Tel: 01924 200799

www.miscarriageassociation.org.uk

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Books

For children:

Goodbye Baby – Cameron's story

By Gillian Griffiths, illustrated by Lindsay MacLeod

Published by Saint Andrew Press, 2010.

ISBN: 978-0-7152-0940-0

A storybook for young children who have been affected by miscarriage in the family. It is based on conversations between Gillian and her son Cameron.

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.

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.

Sad isn't bad

by Michaelene Mundy

Published by Abbey Press, 1998.

ISBN: 0870293214

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 little girl finds she is carrying an ever-growing bag of worries. Once she finds someone to talk to, she finds help through sharing her worries and working out how to deal with them.

The following two books are no longer in print but you may be able to find used copies through a bookshop or online.

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.
For ages 4-8.

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.

For adults and children:

Michael Rosen's Sad Book

by Michael Rosen, illustrated by

Quentin Blake

Published by Walker Books, 2004.

ISBN: 0744598982

Michael Rosen writes about his feelings following the death of his teenage son from meningitis. An excellent book to help children – and adults – understand 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 with hidden fears and anxieties.

Thanks

Our thanks to Christine Moulder, who wrote the first edition of this leaflet, and all the people who shared their thoughts and experiences with us.

Need to talk to someone who understands?

Call our support line on 01924 200799. Monday to Friday, 9am-4pm

Or email info@miscarriageassociation.org.uk



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The knowledge to help

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