

Telling the Siblings

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It's painful for parents to tell children that the baby they are expecting is going to die or has died but children are aware of emotions and need information on what is going on in the family. Children also need to mourn the loss of the sibling they were expecting to come home. Here are some ways for parents to support their children during this time:

- Tell the children about the baby's death using only as much detail as is necessary. Remember each child's developmental level is different so choose your words accordingly.
- If the child is in nursery or elementary school, provide information to the teacher on what is going on in the family. Ask her/him to watch for any unusual behavior and report to you. A teacher can offer support to your child during a time when you are grieving and may not be emotionally available.
- Involve the children in making memories for the deceased baby. Children too young to write can draw a picture or you can trace their hands and footprints in a family book. Having something tangible for children to see when they are older helps them know the baby is part of the family and still their sibling.
- If you are continuing the pregnancy think about letting your children be present for future ultrasounds so they can "see" the baby too.
- Seek help from someone who will talk with your children about what to expect when the baby is born. Many hospitals have child-life specialists who are very knowledgeable in this area.
- Discuss your comfort level regarding children seeing the baby after the birth. The final decision doesn't have to be made until you have seen the baby yourself. Most children see a "baby," not abnormalities and are grateful to have seen and held their brother or sister. Families who choose not to involve their children often regret that their children were not able to see their sibling and say goodbye.

Making the baby part of the family

Building memories are helpful for children and parents too. A special book made for the baby "tells the story" of this child's life during pregnancy and gives children the opportunity to go back and review the story when they want more information. At each developmental stage children can understand more information and will ask more detailed questions. This also lets children know the baby is a topic that can be openly discussed in the family and is a visible reminder that the baby is still part of the family even though no longer physically present. A concrete representation that tells the life of this child helps future children they can be their own person and not a replacement that child. Often it is the older siblings who share the memories with the subsequent children.