

# **When a Child Dies: What Medical Personnel Can Do**



A support group for parents,  
grandparents and siblings  
Who have suffered the death  
Of a child, grandchild or sibling.

Published by:

**Bereaved Parents of the USA**

## **When a Child Dies: A Parent's Perspective For Caregivers**

What happens in the hospital while a child is dying can affect surviving family members for a lifetime. The care they and their dying child receive will affect the severity and length of their grieving, as well as their ability to resume normal lives eventually. Please consider the following suggestions from people whose children died while they were patients in the hospital.

### **When the Child is Dying**

- Always refer to the child by name.
- Prepare family members for what they will see before they see it. Give explanations in clear, simple language.
- Recognize that you may need to give the same explanation several times.
- Answer all questions fully and respectfully
- Parents need to parent. If possible-and if they want to-let them help care for their Child.
- If they wish to, allow parents to observe procedures, whenever possible.
- Always tell parents the truth about their Child's condition, including what you do and don't know.
- Be prepared for (and understand) tears and other expressions of feeling from family members
- Don't hide your own feelings to protect The family. They will appreciate that you care

- Reassure families that everything possible is being done for their child.
- Be prepared for denial. Such emotional protection, though difficult for you to deal with, will lessen over time.
- If family members wish to be there, Arrange for them to be with the child at the moment of death.
- Treat parents equally; fathers need support, too.
- Because the illness and death of a sibling is always traumatic, acknowledge the feelings of other children in the family.

### **After the Child has Died**

- If you are the one to break the news, take the time to tell the family what will happen next.
- Feel free to express your condolences - with words or a hug.
- Arrange for parents to have as much time as they need with their dead child.
- Ask if you can contact anyone for the parents - family, friends, a minister.
- If possible, take a photograph or footprint of a deceased newborn to include in the child's chart; parents may need to prove to themselves that their child was real.
- If your only contact with parents is in an emergency room, be sure to give them adequate time to absorb what has happened

- If asked, be willing to give detailed information about the circumstances of death, such as the amount of pain or last words.
- Ask about organ transplants, but be sure to explain the care that will be taken and that their child will be treated with dignity and respect at all times.
- Leave a phone number where you can be reached, so the family can call you to get answers to questions that may come up after they leave the hospital.
- If you have had a long-term relationship with the child and family, consider attending the funeral or memorial service.
- Write a note of condolence. Even though your relationship with their child is over, the parents will really appreciate any expression of your concern for them and feeling for their child.

### **What You Can Do to Understand Bereavement and to Help the Families of Children Who Have Died**

- Learn about bereavement and how it affects family members. There are many good books and brochures available.
- Avoid such rationalizations as, “Your child would have been a burden to you as he was,” or “She just would have suffered if she had lived.”
- Do not assume that all of the family’s criticism of the hospital and its staff is without merit. Some of it may need to be considered and acted upon.

- Avoid suggesting “busy work”, or medication for the newly bereaved. It is not of benefit, in the long run, for the family members to avoid or postpone dealing with their grief.

## **What You Can Do to Prepare Yourself**

You may have feelings of frustration, sadness and even failure when a child you have been caring for dies. Do not deny these feelings but find a safe outlet for them. Your honest expressions of emotion will allow you to be more sensitive to those in your care and will enhance your own emotional well-being

To help you or to use as referrals to others, Bereaved Parents/USA has other brochures on various topics. Some are listed in the following column. Suggestions of books and information and the names of support groups and the brochures are available on the Bereaved Parents/USA website:

**[www.bereavedparentswusa.org](http://www.bereavedparentswusa.org)**

The following brochures are also available:

- The Bereaved Parents of the USA
- In The Beginning
- Sudden Death
- Prolonged Illness
- For Bereaved Grandparents
- Emergency Personnel: How to Help The Family After The Sudden Death of a Child