Having More Children After Loss: A Guide for Bereaved Parents

The journey of going on to have more children after the loss of your heart warrior is filled with complex emotions. This guide aims to offer support, understanding, and practical advice as you navigate this path.

Understanding Your Emotions

When thinking about having another baby after loss, it's completely normal to experience a range of emotions, including:

- Anxiety and fear of your new baby being poorly
- Grief that may resurface or intensify
- Guilt about "moving on" or "replacing" your lost child
- Hope and excitement for your new baby

Remember, all of your feelings are valid. You're not forgetting or replacing the child you lost by growing your family and embracing new joy.

The Decision to Have More Children

The choice to have more children after losing a child is deeply personal. It is important to consider both your emotional readiness and your physical health. Pregnancy after loss can bring up a number of triggers and emotional challenges.

There's no 'right' time to make this decision, and you should take as long as you need to consider the emotional aspects of both having more children or deciding not to. It is important to discuss your feelings openly with your partner. It is normal if you are not on the same page initially, and this makes open lines of communication even more important. Professional counselling, either individually or as a couple, can support you if you're struggling with the decision and help you to work through your emotions.

Remember that having another child doesn't mean you're replacing or forgetting the one you lost. They will be siblings.

Acknowledging Triggers

Throughout your new pregnancy and beyond, you may encounter various triggers that bring up intense emotions. These triggers may include revisiting a hospital setting for appointments and procedures, preparing the nursery and deciding whether to re-use or buy new baby items, and reflecting on your previous pregnancy experience with your child that died.

It can help to try and identify potential triggers in advance, as this will enable you to plan coping strategies and communicate your concerns and needs to your partner, family, and medical team.

If you experience triggers, you should allow yourself space to feel and process emotions as they arise. You can ask your midwife for a referral to the perinatal mental health team, who will discuss these triggers with you in a supported environment and help you feel equipped to face them.

Deciding When to Announce Your Pregnancy

Choosing when to share news of your pregnancy after loss is a personal decision, and there is no right or wrong answer. It is important to consider your comfort level and emotional readiness. Although you will need to inform your medical care team and employer about your pregnancy, outside of this, there is no obligation to announce your pregnancy at a specific time, or until the baby is born, if this is what you choose. When you do decide to share your news, it's okay to ask for specific support or reactions, or to ask a close friend or family member to announce the pregnancy on your behalf.

Medical Support

When expecting a baby following the loss of a child to CHD, it is natural to crave additional reassurance. Most hospital units will have a bereavement midwife, who will be able to provide you with reassurance and answer any questions you have, particularly regarding pregnancy after loss.

You may be offered additional investigations during your pregnancy or soon after your baby is born. These tests may include:

- Reassurance Scans - You may be offered additional scans throughout your pregnancy to provide you with reassurance.
- Fetal Echocardiogram - This scan is similar to a routine ultrasound, but it will be carried out by a specialist and will focus on taking a closer look at your baby's heart to try and identify any issues before your baby is born.
- Genetic Counselling - If your heart baby's CHD was caused by a genetic condition, you may be offered genetic counselling during your pregnancy to discuss whether genetic testing and further investigations would be suitable for your family.
- Echocardiogram - Once your baby is born, they may be offered an echocardiogram so that the specialist can take a closer look at their heart.
- Electrocardiogram (ECG) - Once your baby is born, they may be offered an ECG to monitor the electrical activity of their heart, including the rate and rhythm. This is a quick and painless test which involves putting sticky electrodes on your baby's chest, hands and feet.

As with all screening tests in pregnancy, it is up to you if you choose to have these investigations. You can discuss this with your midwife or doctor to find out why these tests are recommended and to decide which screening tests are right for you.

Welcoming Your New Child

Mixed emotions when a new baby is born are very normal, and this can be even more complex when a child is born after loss. Fluctuations in hormones, fatigue and recovering from birth can all have a big impact on your mood, and your grief may feel more overwhelming. Be aware of the signs of postnatal depression and anxiety, which can be more common in bereaved parents. Be open with health professionals and those around you about how you feel. These people are there to support you.

Some parents experience a rush of love for their baby as soon as they are born, whereas for others, this can be a slower process where the love and bond develop over time. When you have experienced the loss of a child, you may feel hesitant to bond with your new baby. Take your time and be patient with yourself.

Honouring Your Child That Died

As you prepare for a new addition to your family, there will be lots of things to consider, including whether to re-use items such as clothes and toys, and whether to re-use the nursery, or create a new nursery for the new baby. These decisions are very personal, and there are no right or wrong answers.

Many parents will choose to re-use clothes and toys, as lots of siblings in normal circumstances would hand these items down. However other parents may find it triggering to see another baby in the clothes of their child that died, and therefore choose new items for the new baby.

Once your new baby is here, there are lots of ways that you can honour your child that died. Many parents will find a way to represent them in family pictures, such as holding a framed photo or a toy, and buy ‘little brother/sister’ outfits for the new baby.

As your new baby grows up, you can tell them about their older sibling. When explaining death to children, it's important to use simple and clear words like “died” and “dead”, avoiding confusing phrases like "passed away" or "gone to sleep."

There are a number of ways that you can nurture a relationship between both your child that died, and your new baby.

- If you have a special place or grave that you visit to remember your heart baby, you can involve your younger child in visits.
- Designate a special area in your home with photos and precious items that remind you of your child that died. This can be a focal point for remembrance and a place to talk about them with your other children.
- Share memories with your new baby, and tell them about their older sibling so that they can know them better.
- Buy them a gift or card from their sibling that died at birthdays and Christmas.

Parent Experiences

Abby, Francis' Mum

"Francis is our eldest child, and when he was alive, we often spoke to him about his future siblings. After he died we decided that we did want to go on to have more children in time, and to give Francis the siblings we had told him about.

"We found out we were expecting again 16 months after Francis had died. Before conceiving, we had discussed our plan to have more children with a bereavement midwife, who advised us of the additional reassurance we would be provided with during the pregnancy, and also helped us come to a decision regarding the best hospital to provide us with the care we needed.

"The care we were provided with by the hospital was brilliant. We were kept under the care of the Fetal Medicine Unit and Rainbow Clinic (for pregnancy after loss) throughout the pregnancy, and were scanned every 2-3 weeks, or more regularly if we had any concerns. I was referred to the perinatal mental health team and was provided with weekly counselling sessions throughout the pregnancy until my son was nearly 1.

"We were offered fetal echos at 16 weeks and again at 22 weeks. After our son was born, he was checked over by multiple paediatricians, and was given a follow-up appointment for an Echo and ECG.

"Pregnancy and parenting after loss have been incredibly difficult. A lot of people seem to think that having another baby will 'heal' you in some way, but I have found that if anything, it makes the grief more complex. Now his little brother is 3, knows all about Francis and talks about him every day. He is always excited to visit Franics' grave and choose his flowers, or play with toys in Francis' room. He also understands that sometimes Mummy and Daddy feel sad because we miss Francis, and that it is ok to feel that way, which has given him great emotional understanding. We have found that continuing to grow our family is a beautiful way of keeping Francis' memory alive."

Carina, Eadie's Mum

"We decided early on that we would try for another baby, we needed that purpose in life again. In February 2016, our son Finley was born and we started to live again. We allowed ourselves to be happy and focused our energies on giving Finley the best start in life.

"Eadie is a huge part of our lives and she is always with us. I do still feel a physical hole in my heart that will always be there but I have learnt to accept that it's ok and I can continue living my life without feeling guilty. Finley is also monitored regularly to make sure his heart is developing as it should and this gives us an enormous amount of reassurance."

Sarah, Isaac's Mum

"We had a scenario recently where we took our son to a children's theme park and it broke our hearts when we realised there was an empty spot where Isaac should be, sat next to his brother. We had a really good chat about it that evening and said that it was almost healthy to react this way and it's our way of showing the love we have for Isaac when we think about him being there too. Don't be afraid to talk about these situations and almost embrace it as another way to remember your little one."

Final Thoughts

Remember, there's no "right" way to navigate this journey. Be gentle with yourself, honour your feelings, and don't hesitate to seek support when needed. Your capacity to love is endless, and your heart has room for both the child you lost and the children in your arms.

Other resources

The Lullaby Trust offers a Care Of Next Infant (CONI) scheme, which provides practical support and equipment when expecting another baby after loss, including ongoing specialist support both during pregnancy and once the baby has arrived.

The Tiny Tickers Facebook support group for bereaved heart parents is a supportive and understanding community of those who understand the loss of a child. We welcome you to join **here**.

Our website contains information and advice on navigating loss **here.**

As part of our Family Experience video series, parents discuss their experiences of dealing with bereavement. Watch the video **here**.

Many bereaved parents find comfort in creating an online tribute page after losing a child. This space, like an online memory box, can be filled with memories (photos, music and videos) and shared with family and friends. You can also light candles, write messages and give gifts. It is possible to use this page to fundraise in memory of your child, but this is by no means obligatory. You can create your free tribute page **here**.