The loss of a baby is a trying time, as such a death typically presents a challenge to even the strongest families and those close to them. While it is important that families work through grief together, understanding that each individual may process the loss of a baby differently is crucial. For example, a mother may look to her social networks for support, while a father may busy himself with tasks to keep his mind off the death of his baby. Like adults, children too need ways to cope with losing a sibling, family member, or friend. However, adults often are unsure of how to help children process the death of a baby. Therefore, the following research-based tips are meant to help parents and other adults support children of a variety of ages who experience baby-loss.
1. Remember the baby through memorial artifacts. Having and talking about physical objects such as pictures and stuffed animals can help grieving children connect to the baby who died. These artifacts solidify the baby’s identity and help establish the child’s relationship to their brother, sister, or loved one. For instance, placing a photograph of the baby somewhere in the house and having a special stuffed animal can be tangible ways for the child to connect physically with the baby.

2. Help the child understand death. When a baby dies, some may believe their baby has gone to heaven, while others believe that there is no life after death. These views can vary even within families. Although thinking about death is complex, young children are capable of understanding, though their definitions can sometimes be disjointed. When adults are ready, it can be helpful to talk to children about what death means for them and their family members, depending on what spiritual or religious beliefs they may or may not have. Working through the meaning of death together can help the child better make sense of the loss. Adults might consider making connections between the baby and other deceased members of the family because doing so may help them better understand the permanence of death. Reading children’s books about death that align with the family’s values can also help children see death more readily.

3. Talk about emotions. Although communication is a key part of effective coping, many bereaved individuals avoid talking about experiences and negative emotions following loss. This is particularly detrimental for children who often look to parents or other adults for cues about how to process death. Rather than keep them bottled up, acknowledging feelings and sharing them with the child, letting him or her know it is okay to feel sad, is important. If verbal communication is hard, try communicating through other means such as writing or drawing.

4. Share responsibilities. Following the loss of a baby, getting back into a routine can be difficult. As a result, many children experience a “double loss” wherein they grieve the loss of a baby, as well as the loss of their parents. For instance, older children may forgo their typical activities, choosing instead to comfort grieving parents or to do chores around the house. Recognizing struggles with the loss and sharing them with the child, making sure the child knows adults are there to support her or him is helpful. If friends and family are in close proximity, leaning on them for support can relieve the burden older children may experience in wanting to help parents.

5. Remember the child is still a sibling. With the loss of a baby brother or sister, a child may also mourn the loss of his or her own identity as a sibling. As part of this ‘double loss,’ a child may feel that he or she has lost a part of him or herself. Reinforcing the child’s role as a sibling can help him or her feel whole again. An idea for maintaining the sibling bond is to have living children pick out a “brother” or “sister” card each year in honor of the baby’s birthday.

6. Celebrate milestones. Although ritualizing the remembrance of a lost baby might feel as though it casts a shadow over happy occasions, remembrance activities can help bereaved children maintain contact and communication with their sibling. This can soften the pain of coming to understand the permanence of death. Creating a special activity for children to participate in, whether it is celebrating the baby’s birthday or attending Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep’s annual Remembrance Walk can help the child sustain a relationship with the baby who has died.

7. Build a network. Because of the stigma that surrounds openly discussing infant loss and the lack of understanding about how to best support those who have lost a child, there can be relatively few spaces that feel safe to talk about losing a baby. Connecting with families that understand the pain of losing a baby and the importance of keeping the baby’s memory alive can be helpful. This not only will encourage children to be open about their emotions, but also help to demonstrate that they are not alone in their grief.

8. Tell stories. Sharing memories about the pregnancy or baby can be a way to reminisce about his or her life. For example, parents might talk about the baby’s big feet or the time they found out they were pregnant. Sharing others’ stories of loss with children can help them understand that they are not alone.

9. Read stories. Reading children’s books about child loss can be helpful. Stories can give children examples of others’ experiences, as well as teach them how to think about the death of a baby in terms that are understandable to them.

The loss of a baby is emotionally difficult for all who are touched by such tragedy. Although children may not fully understand the death of a baby, even the very young can be surprisingly intuitive and may internalize emotions that they pick up on from family members. Depending on the child’s age, encouraging an open and honest approach to dealing with grief can not only help children come to terms with the loss of a baby, but may in fact model healthy coping behavior for the future.

*Veronica Drosor and Kate Hoyt are Ph.D. students in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Denver. Their research on helping children cope with the loss of a baby was completed in the course Visual Narratives of Women’s Health as part of a service-learning project with Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep’s Drawings From the Heart project. The research was compiled with classmates Benjamin Boyce, Nivea Castaneda, Jeni Hunniecutt, Jessica Johnson, Emily Krebs, and Melodee Sova and was supervised by Dr. Erin Willer.*