

Am I Still A Big Sister?

Paul

Why is the sky blue?

Why do dogs have four legs?

If we are going to sleep later, why do we have to make the bed?

If we didn't have a nose, what would we smell with?

The questions my children ask are sometimes clever, sometimes silly but always demanding of an answer. On more than one occasion I've had to default to the *just because* answer after realizing I had been cornered and out-witted by a 5-year-old's simplistic yet thoughtful inquiry.

Children have questions. Parents have answers. **Allegedly.**

What about if they ask, "*Am I still a big sister?*"

One of the first, of many, uncertainties after we lost our daughter, was the dilemma on how to share the news that the little sister our children had been waiting for, would not be coming after all. Something that neither my wife nor I understood and only recently learned, would have to be transformed, translated and explained to my then 9-year-old daughter and 7-year-old son.

Impossible.

I took deep breaths as I waited for them to come home from school. The doctor's office I had just left was supposed to solely be focused on picking a delivery date. Instead it became a forced realization of the frailty of life and the uncertainty of the future. Now, as I shelved my own angst to make room for the conversation that would shatter my children's little worlds, my mind formed a jumbled mess of words, clichés and thoughts — searching, begging, reaching for something that would make sense to them. I longed for the perfect explanation.

The words fell short.

I stumbled over run-on sentences and fragments broken up by my own stuttering voice. The words evolved into an embrace. An embrace cures so much. I soon realized there would be no easy fix. There would be no simple answers. This tragic event would have to remain unresolved. The only answer my wife and I were sure of was that we were all immediately affected by the loss of a little baby girl that none of us had ever met.

So how do you *handle* your grieving children? What can you *do* to help the hurting siblings of the child lost? Is it possible that the world of grief which leaves adults dumbfounded, can be inhabited and survived by children who bring even less discernment to the situation?

The answer is **YES.**

One of the most powerful realizations about our infant loss (still-birth) was that an actual memory of Bella wasn't required for the actual pain of missing her to be existent. I would assume had we lost our daughter at the age of 1, or 3 or 6, the grieving process may look or feel different, but the assumption that our children would go unmoved simply because they never met Bella, was a short-lived.

Because of this, Bella became a very real part of our lives. We discussed her with the children. We answered as many questions as we could and those questions that we couldn't answer, we simply allowed our imagination to take us wherever we wanted. My wife and I decided early on to make sure we talked to each other with candid honesty. We incorporated that same principle with our children. Sometimes those conversations led to us laughing, sometimes they led us to tears, but they always led us closer.

We continue to try our best to not shy away from Bella-themed conversations. Our children have taken an active role in the infant loss events that we have attended. They each stand in line at a table anxious to decorate an angel, color a rock or put together a bracelet as they work through their own grief, in their own way. They volunteer to wear the March of Dimes *Team Bella* shirts we had made on any given day as they head off to school. Allowing them to remember her, **their way**, has continued to restore and heal them along the path.

Giving permission to your children to talk to you when, how and as long as they want about their feelings of grief is invaluable. Letting them go at their own speed, in their own words and with their own expressions builds a trust that they need in order to reveal this intimate and unsettled part of their hearts. Never underestimate the healing power of your attention, your patience, and your embrace.

In the end, there is no concrete practice that eliminates the hurt or the grief. If you are reading this and especially if you have experienced the loss of a child — that is a lesson you have already learned. Our children still catch us off guard with a random one-liner as we drive to the store or by a picture drawn that we accidentally come across. These moments, although heart-wrenching, are also reminders that they to, are hurting right along with us and we can't leave them behind as we try to find our own way.

I end this article with two examples of what I just mentioned. The first is a picture that I came across just a few days ago. I don't know when my daughter drew it nor what her reasoning was. It simply reminded me that Bella has a big sister who misses her and thinks about her.



It shows an angel in Heaven saying,

“Hi! What’s your name? The little girl responds, “Bella De Leon”

The next is an excerpt from my son's journal. He wrote this 10 months after he lost Bella. In between writings that talked about his favorite video games and the NFL, we were moved to tears when this post was

recorded:

“Today when I was in the shower, I almost started to cry because I walked past a picture of Bella earlier. God needed an angel with Him and he picked her. That was a good choice but I just wish she was sitting right next to me. I just say, “Please God, I want my sister! Just please let her come home!”

Listen. Love. Laugh. Live.

They need it and so do you.

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