

Siblings

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However you look at it, being pregnant with a baby that is diagnosed with CDH is an experience. In another article, I will be talking about the pregnancy & CDH but for this article I wanted to talk about the other siblings in the family.

The dilemma I faced when dealing with our other children was of high importance to me. It was the thing that stumped me the most through the pregnancy. How you handle the situation depends on the age of the children in your family & the way you handle yourself. I was faced with two young children who were getting excited about my growing tummy. In any other pregnancy, this would be the perfect opportunity to reel off into the rehearsed 'we're going to have a baby brother or sister to play with' & 'mummy has to go to hospital for a few days & nights' routine. So when the opportunity showed itself, I was dumbfounded. What do I tell them? What can I tell them? How much can I tell them? What will they understand?

For all the things that flashed through my mind, from 'this baby is going to die' to nothing to worry about' (that one didn't sit well with me), I did tell them that we were going to have a baby, full stop. I went to bed that night & cried again, for the future of our family, for what we were about to be put through. Then I needed the answers. What was I going to say the next time asked (as they always do!).

I was offered a counselling service from the hospital when I was first diagnosed, & I thought it was now needed. The burning question was 'How do I tell my kids?' We discussed death & what it means to little kids, do they need to be involved with the funeral, and do they see the dead baby? You can imagine, it was gruesome to discuss but I needed to know before hand so I could work on automatic pilot when the time came.

The answers came like this:

°Don't leave the kids out of your grief; they need to be part of the process with you.

°Tell them that you are going to have a baby & that the baby will be sick, very sick, but you (the mother) will be fine. If you get sad it's because the baby is sick.

°If the baby dies, don't tell them the baby is 'sleeping'.

°If there is to be a funeral, even if it's a small closed funeral, include the kids. They take their own perspective of things & will ask questions on what they don't understand.

Even though my cherub didn't die, I did have a stillborn with my next pregnancy & the last point was a good one for me. As I would burst into tears at any given moment over the next year, my girls would come up to me, put a hand on my shoulder & ask if I was crying because of them or because of our baby? Once they knew it wasn't them, they would skip away, keep playing & leave me to 'cry it out'. They knew what to do, they understood the sadness in me & why, & were happy to know it wasn't them causing the grief.

When talking with kids, keep it honest & short. If they want more information, they will ask for it. There is a balance between too little information & too much. Give them too much & they switch off or become confused, give them too little & they become frustrated. Listen to the question they ask, consider what they have said, then answer to your best, honest ability.

Don't be shy to seek counselling, it helped to ease the burden I was carrying, & introduced me to the counsellor that I was to have dealings with for the time my cherub was in hospital. It served a second purpose as well. I wanted the counsellor to meet me whilst I was still a fairly sane person, not my normal self but not in full flight grief/stress parent mode either. This did prove beneficial later, in the first week of the wild child's life, as the Dr's & nurses were worried that I was 'too up' all the time. Too happy! They thought I was in total denial; I was just thrilled that the machines were still on. I was taking it minute by minute, living in the minute. Because we had built a small report, when the counsellor approached me with the staff's worries she could balance my behaviour with her previous experience of me & thus, allay their fears.

Our kids have an invisible umbilical cord to us. They know how to move our buttons, the same way they will pick up on our emotional stress. It's easy to forget they are in the situation with you, but don't fear, they will pipe up & remind you when you become remiss.