

Helping Siblings to Grieve

By Emma Comito

When my angel Imogene was born sleeping my eldest was just about to turn 4. Her other sisters were 2.5 and 14mths. They had excitedly kissed my twin size belly the day before, telling the babies that they will see them both to give them a cuddle soon.

Imogene's twin brother Tobias was born easily and drama free. We had cuddles and then proceeded to give birth to Imogene. She had a cord prolapse and then a placenta abruption, her birth was silent. 3 very excited toddlers entered the room a few hours later, bursting with pride to see the 2 babies. Tobias and Imogene were next to each other, wrapped and in bed with me. They covered them both with kisses and then proceeded to unwrap them to have a good look at the "baby boy" and "baby girl".

It was then that Isaac (nearly 4 yr old) asked what was wrong with the baby girl. We explained that she had died and that he could hold her and kiss her, but she would not be coming home with us. This explanation was too much for the girls, and they did not fully understand. All 3 then proceeded to take turns holding both the babies, posing for photos that would soon become more precious to us than we realised at the time. They all kissed and cuddled Imogene and said goodbye to her.

On the next visit to the hospital, the question was asked, "Where is Imogene?" and again a simple explanation of "she died and went to heaven," was all that was required. Hearing the kids very matter of factly telling visitors "that the baby girl died"- seemed cold, and yet simplified it all as well.

Planning Imogene's funeral we decided that her brothers and sisters would be there, we needed them there, and we felt they should be there. They all wrapped a present each and put it on "Imogene's Special Box"- we did not tell them that her body was in there, as we thought it may be confusing seeing that we already told them she was in heaven. Throughout the ceremony the kids were wonderful, providing some smiles through our tears as Matilda (14mths) danced around the coffin and pulled the curtains. Our newborn twin Tobias slept in our arms, we clung to him like a life raft.

After the ceremony we had a balloon release, which afterwards I realised was such a beautiful idea, especially for children to be a part of. As they watch the balloons disappear up into the blue sky, they get a grasp of how far heaven is, and a sense of realisation, the balloons don't come back. In their concept so far, they still think when they release a helium balloon they are sending it up to Imogene. It was watching these balloons that I also realised the depth of understanding Isaac had.

His gut wrenching sobs as we all watched the balloons float away, haunt me still. Above the music a 4 year old boy could be heard sobbing from the heart and I now know that he too was grieving more deeply than I realised, he too was suffering from the effects of his sister's untimely death. Imogene's death has changed us all, as a family and as individuals. My children have been my lifeline,





a reason to get out of bed, and have kept me grounded, when really I would like to shut off the world for just a moment.

Kids keep it simple, they keep it real. They need to be told the truth (watered down while they are little). They grieve just like we do, but with less understanding. They feel sad, they feel happy, they are confused, they need reassurance from us, they need lots of cuddles and time- things that at times you are too tired from your own grief to do, but you must. They seem like they are “over it”. They are not.

We decided early on that Imogene would be remembered with happiness. That we would teach our children to be proud of their sister in heaven, that they are special to have a sister in heaven. We did not want them to live under a cloud of sadness and we wanted them to realise that while we are devastated and sad that Imogene is not here, that we will always include her as part of our family, our 5th child, our 3rd daughter, their sister. We also needed them to know, that while she is our special angel, they are our special children too, and that we love all our kids just the same, whether they be in heaven or in our arms.

We have taken Isaac to sibling days run by Sids and Kids- these morning teas allow him to share his feelings with counsellors and other children who have had a sibling die. He enjoys these days (we are not sure if it is the food or the session) and seems to come away with more questions, but more settled. Like an adult, it helps to talk and hear other stories and to know you are not alone.

We are always honest. We have told the kids that Imogene’s cord broke before she was born, and that mummy and daddy tried their hardest to help her, this seemed to bring them some reassurance. Isaac has blamed us in fits of anger, and we understood that. To him, his parents went to the hospital to have 2 babies, and for a reason he still doesn’t fully understand, only 1 baby came home- it must be our fault then... after gentle words and explanation, and reassurance, the anger has diminished, although it can still rear up at times when he is feeling frustrated.

Each of children has a canvas picture board up on the wall in our playroom. When the twins were born, only Tobias’s board was put up on the wall. A week later, Isaac asked where was Imogene’s board, why was it not on the wall? It answered my question- do I put it up or not? I did. It is now covered with pictures the kids have drawn for Imogene and it gives them a place to put special things for her that they have made. It also makes my wall look complete.

We have a table in the family room with photos of Imogene, a candle and little angels on it. This has become almost sacred to them, Imogene’s special table, without me ever having to say something. One of my mother’s day gifts from Isaac this year was a plaque with a butterfly on it, to put on this table so I can remember her (like I need to be reminded). But it showed me that he understands and appreciates.

We do take them to the grave to say hello, mainly on special occasions. But, with 4 little kids walking around it is a little bit chaotic- which is our family life. As we drive past the cemetery (which we do often as it is local) they always wave hello to “Imogene’s Special Place.” Isaac has asked randomly to go, and we always follow through. But I am finding they are each finding their own way to remember her. We have a couple of books about grief and death written for children which we read to them a lot in the first few months. These books opened up conversation and we adapted the story to fit our situation. The books sit on the bookcase now, and it is occasionally one of the kids will bring it out to read- “Imogene’s books” as they are known.

Reading books like these are a wonderful way to keep the communication lines open in a non-threatening manner, and give you some time to reflect with them and have a cuddle at the same time.

The kids all know that they can carry Imogene with them in their hearts, and that she can hear them when they speak to her. Many questions have been asked about heaven and what it is like. We made it sound lovely, with lots of lovely things to do and play with- and we must have made it sound too good as Isaac at one point wanted to go there for a swim!

Our Christmas tree is covered with a special ornament for each of the children, including Imogene, as well as Christmas bauble with each of their names on it. We buy a present (with input from the kids) a present for a girl the same as Imogene to put under the Wishing Tree.

For Imogene's 1st Birthday we bought a dolls pram just as we would have if she was here, and then donated it to the playgroup we attend- "Imogene's Pram". We will do this every birthday, probably donating to somewhere relevant each year. This helps both us and the kids to still feel like Imogene is getting a gift, and also to see the benefit it is bringing to someone else.

Tobias and Imogene's 1st Birthday was celebrated with family and many friends. We celebrated a little boy that has put back the smile on our face and we celebrated a special girl whose short life has changed ours forever. The kids were a big part of the planning. We had a massive balloon release and sang Happy Birthday to Imogene- this gave the kids a chance to wish her a happy birthday and celebrate the day. It also started a lot more questions from friends children, those that were too young when she died to understand what happened, and refreshed the older children's memory of her.

Our friends though, are wonderful. They understand our desire to include Imogene, and know that their children need to know about her, because our children will tell them about her!!

Isaac started school this year and we were determined to make sure that right from the start people knew the truth about our family. The school has been great. When we enrolled we filled in a section relating to "things we should know about your child" and in that section we gave a brief outline of Imogene's death and the impact it has had on Isaac and how we are managing as a family. I then spoke to his teacher about Imogene and she has been wonderful and understanding, allowing him to speak about her whenever he wants and always making him feel normal for doing so. The parents have been great too, with most just taking our loss on board and leaving it at that. Some have almost run away from the conversation, and others have put their arm around me and let me know they care, and sadly some have had their own losses and they have been the most understanding.

But the main thing is to be up front and honest- with everyone. I wanted Isaac (and the rest of my kids) to know that they can include Imogene as part of their family to anyone and everyone, including school friends, without ridicule or question. Keep in contact with your child's class teacher and let them know of anniversary dates etc so that they are aware and can be more sympathetic as these days approach.

Isaac takes our Bears of Hope bear to bed, and has the one true family photo beside his bed- at his request. We have photos of Imogene around the house and we even showed the kids the video of them meeting Tobias and Imogene- and this seemed to cement her in their minds even more and also made her seem more real to the girls, who were so young at the time.

Scarlette is now 4, the same age as Isaac was when Imogene died. She talks about Imogene a lot, and never lets anyone forget her when talking about how many kids are in our family. Whenever she sees a helium balloon, it is her request that it is released to go to heaven for Imogene to play with. She is always on the lookout for rainbows- as we told the kids that rainbows are all the angels saying hello.

Matilda is 2.5 now, and she talks about “my friend” Imogene and knows that she is in heaven, but as much as a 2.5 yr can understand- her understanding will increase as she gets older, but already we can see that she will remember her as her special sister. She now makes sure we have spare seat at the dinner table for Imogene too!

Tobias is 18mths and we are just starting to show him the pictures and teach him her name. Funnily enough he is always happy to play with balloons, occupies him all day some days!

I am planning on writing a story photo book and putting all Imogene’s photos in it, so that he can read about his very special twin sister. I have been told by a leading psychologist that Tobias is the child I should watch out for. If we do not include Imogene as part of the family, he, as her twin, will feel a sense of loss all his life- so strong is the bond of twins. He told us to create memories of Imogene for him. Keep a baby book, include her as his twin at birthdays and other special events, if not for him, for all of us, as he is meant to be sharing them with her, and in some special way he still is.

It is hard to know what is right or wrong when it comes to grief and death with the other children. I have found that honesty, lots of love, cuddles, reassurance and to keep talking has helped.

Do what is right for you, your partner and your children. We don’t worry what other people think- this is our life, our reality, who is to judge. My children know that it is okay to be sad, to be happy, to talk, and to remember. Your children will follow your lead. We are trying to show them that we will live; we live in her honour, with Imogene in our hearts.

Show them how to remember and how to smile again. Our hearts will always have that hole in them, one that will never be filled, but we can lead the way to show our children how to grieve, how to remember and how to honour and be proud of their very special angel brothers and sisters.

www.bearsofhope.org.au

Further stories & help sheets available online.

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