



Pregnancy Loss and Infant Death Alliance

Supporting those whose work supports bereaved families.

Summary of Practice Guidelines:

Offering the Baby to Bereaved Parents

First and foremost, cultivate an empathic relationship with parents. Ask them about the pregnancy and find out how the parents conceptualize this event, so that you can provide care accordingly. Cultivating an empathic relationship with parents gives them a caring context within which to process their experiences and emotions, and thoughtfully explore their options.

Understand the benefits parents can experience in spending time with their baby. For the parents who want to see their baby, doing so validates their role as parents to this child and can foster productive grieving through the opportunity to express their love and cultivate cherished memories. Parents who don't feel the need to see their baby may not reap these benefits, and there is no empirical evidence that they should be pressed to do so.

Work to individualize care. Every parent is unique, so rather than directing their involvement with their baby, ask parents about their needs and preferences, and accommodate each family's process and timeframe. When parents decide to see their baby, they benefit from pacing themselves instead of having arbitrary constraints placed on them.

Follow the parents' lead. Be an unbiased sounding board for their thoughts and feelings, offer them options and individualized guidance, address their concerns, and leave the decision-making to them. By listening, responding, and respecting their decisions, you are honoring their self-knowledge and competence, and giving them room to make satisfying choices.

Practice cultural and religious sensitivity. In some cultures, close contact with a dead body is prohibited, while in other cultures, it is considered the highest form of respect to remain with a body until burial. Assess each family's practices, keeping in mind that they may or may not wish to observe their traditions. Never assume—always ask.

Honor the parent-baby bond. Central to your mission is to honor the parent-baby relationship, however the parents might conceptualize it, and make room for each parent to nurture their baby and/or their baby's memory in their own way.

Engage parents in open-ended conversations about their baby and their options. Ask parents what they are feeling and thinking about with regard to their baby, the circumstances, and their options. When you listen to parents, you are able to accompany them as they evaluate their options, communicate their needs, and figure out what is best for themselves.

Engage parents in conversations proactively, when possible. If the baby has died before birth, or if the baby is likely to die during or shortly after delivery, ask the parents, "Have you thought about seeing your baby?" so that they can think proactively about how to make the most of this time.

Continually assess what the parents are thinking and feeling with regard to seeing their baby. In your ongoing conversations with parents, listen to their thoughts, feelings, fears, and ideas, so you can tailor your guidance and support to fit their needs.

Utilize a checklist that makes room for qualitative answers. Rather than simply checking “yes” or “no,” document the parents’ thoughts, feelings, and fears, and your responses. These notes can help you and your team assess and respond to their needs for time, information, and reassurance, and provide comprehensive and compassionate continuity of care.

Offer unbiased, balanced information that helps parents figure out what is best for themselves. During your conversations with the parents, tell them, “Some parents find it comforting and helpful to spend time with their baby, while others decline, and the choice is yours to make.” Assure parents that their thoughts and feelings are normal and natural, and express confidence in their ability to make decisions.

Reassure parents by addressing their fears or concerns. Parents can benefit from knowing that many parents feel uncertain or scared about seeing a dead body or a baby who might have an unusual appearance. Inquire, “Do you have any concerns about what your baby looks like?” Then you can address their fears by describing their baby’s appearance, letting them know they may find family resemblances, and telling them that their baby will be brought to them, warmed and wrapped in a warm blanket.

Remain accommodating and impartial to the wide range of parental responses. Be aware of your own biases, so that you can resist convincing or pushing them to do what *you* believe is best. Focus on exploring the options with each parent, and let them know that their baby will continue to be available to them, if and when they are ready. Whatever a parent’s choices and pace, continue to engage, listen, and support.

Encourage parents to do what is meaningful to them. Some parents will have lots of ideas and engage freely in rituals and nurturing behaviors. Others will be grateful for your culturally sensitive suggestions or reassurance. Describe what other parents have found meaningful to do during this time; doing so gives parents a framework and permission to think broadly about what they want to do.

Find creative ways to honor the bond between multiple babies. Many parents are keenly aware of the bond between babies who spent time together in the womb. Whether all of their babies are deceased or some are living, parents may want affirmation of this bond by having the opportunity to hold all of their babies together in their arms. Photographs of this time with the babies together can be treasured keepsakes.

Let parents know that their baby is always available to them. A significant way to individualize care is by making the baby freely available to parents for as long as they and their circumstances require. For more related information that can guide policy, also refer to other PLIDA Position Statements and PLIDA Practice Guidelines.

Respect the process of letting go. Letting go of their baby is a process, and for many parents, an important piece of this process is coming to the realization that the body is empty of life. Individualize care in order to give each parent the time they need to come to terms with this reality.

Know that your empathic relationship with parents can aid their adjustment. Whether parents want to see their baby or not, your kindness and understanding are key to supporting parents as they do the emotional, spiritual, and cognitive work they need to do. Providing follow-up care to parents after discharge is a natural extension of this relationship.

For more information and support around implementation of these Guidelines, please refer to *PLIDA Practice Guidelines: Offering the Baby to Bereaved Parents.*