

Ariel's Story

At about 9.00am on Wed 12 July 2006, I dropped both the girls off at the local ABC childcare centre in Drysdale. Ariel attended every Wednesday, Mercedes every Wednesday and Thursday. After dropping the girls off I headed into Geelong, about 20 minutes away, to do errands and shopping and got home at about 12 noon. After having some lunch I did a bit of housework and worked on my tax return. At about 4.30pm I headed off to pick up the girls. I pulled into the petrol station to fill up the car but upon arrival I realised I left my purse on the kitchen table and wouldn't be able to pay so I reversed out and just straight to the childcare centre. On arriving I went to Mercedes' room first as she always like to be with me while getting Ariel. I waited a little while as she was having story time and then she showed me some of the things she'd been doing that day. We then got Ariel from her room. She was actually out in the yard sitting by the shed as the outside toys were being packed away. Karly her primary carer had a chat with me about Ariel's movement (or lack thereof) as she wasn't on the move in a big way. She had started 'bum-shuffling' at about 11 months otherwise was happy to sit. I wasn't concerned about this but said to Karly that I would talk to the health nurse about it just to double check any potential problems as Ariel had her 12 month appointment booked in for Friday. I then headed home with the girls getting back at about 5.15pm.



As soon as I walked in the door I put Ariel in her high chair, warmed her tea and started feeding it to her. Mercedes was just hanging about for a little while happily entertaining herself in her play space. John arrived home from work at about 5.30pm. Ariel could hear John's keys jiggling in the door and started waving before she could even see him. She also started doing a clicking sound with her tongue and the roof of her mouth when her Daddy was nearby. As this was rather understated I drew John's attention to the fact Ariel was acknowledging him and was excited to have him home. John wasn't as involved with Ariel as much as he had been with Mercedes at 12 months simply because he took on activities with Mercedes while I cared for the baby. John went up to the bedroom to get changed out of his work-clothes and I then got some tea for Mercedes and prepared some soup for John & I to eat. John sat down and ate his while mine heated up. I then picked Ariel up and took her to the bathroom, set the heat temperature before running the water and undressed her as the water ran. When the water was at the right temperature I put the plug in and sat her in the shallow water. We have a hose with a shower head fitted to our bath tap as this helps me rinse the shampoo out of the girls' hair and so this was laying on the floor of the bath with the water coming from it. I did a quick mental check that Ariel had a couple of toys and that the water was fine and left the room to get her night nappy and pyjamas ready and put them on the lounge floor in front of the heater. I had no idea that would be the last time I would see her alive. It didn't register in my mind that the tap was still running. As the water was flowing quietly from the shower hose under the water I guess it wasn't overtly obvious, and as I was trying to do a few things at once, in the rush, I didn't think to double check...

pyjamas were dumped on the floor, the microwave was dinging away as my soup had heated and as I was enroute back to the bathroom, John started telling me that he wanted to go up to the shed to work on the car. We were planning to leave for QLD in 8 days time and John had been unwell and was keen to achieve a couple of tasks before we left. I was very anxious about him being out of the house when I was trying to achieve the whole bathing feeding process with the kids and told him I would prefer him to wait until they had gone to bed in about an hour's time. I could hear Ariel singing and playing in the bath while our conversation became a little heated and my anxiety was rising. I didn't want to fight so I told him to go up the bloody shed but that I wasn't happy about it. I lost track of time. Right, now, back to Ariel I thought...hang on it's all quiet I couldn't hear her anymore. I ran to the bathroom, which is right by the kitchen, my instincts causing dread that I could feel in my lower abdomen and then when I got to the bathroom what I saw was so visually shocking, my baby girl floating on her arched back, her face in a bath full of water surrounded by vomit.

My body full of adrenalin, I picked her up immediately. As I held her limp body I felt I split into two people, such was the difficulty of being fully present to the moment. I couldn't function if I were to fully engage in the reality that this was part of me that I had found dead, I have reflected in hindsight. I bolted to the door and screamed out to John, "Ariel's drowned, come quick!!!" John was there in a flash and we placed her on the playroom floor and John began CPR while I called 000. This was a very 'messy' part of the night where we felt completely helpless despite the fact we'd both been trained in CPR but we felt like novices. Ariel was so slippery, her airways were completely water-logged, and as she had just eaten tea was blocked up with peas and carrots too, making it impossible for any air to get in. Calling 000 was problematic too as only a week prior we switched our phone over to a VOIP system and could not get 000! It wasn't enabled at their end we later found out. This was highly distressing and only served to catapult our senses which were under acutely extreme pressure. We actually had to plug our Telstra line back in then make the 000 call on that number and we got through straight away. However, as it wasn't a cordless phone, Ariel had to be carried up to the office to where the phone was plugged to allow for immediacy in communication and action. The Communications Officer coached us through and helped to keep us focused on resuscitating Ariel until the paramedics arrived at our house.

Our 3½ year old daughter, Mercedes, was witnessing this whole incident and was remarkably still and quiet albeit anxious. She got confused when I was speaking on the phone and cut me off by pressing the button, but that was also part of her never having seen me use that particular phone before. I called 000 yet again to re-establish the connection. We continued with CPR until the paramedics arrived a short time later. I lost track of time however. I remember wanting to give them all the space they needed so I got out of the office and sat cross-legged in the doorway with Mercedes on my lap. Mercedes had lots of questions about the men who were doing to Ariel and I was just trying to describe it as we were watching. Ariel had never been conscious since I found her and I instinctively knew we'd lost her and that all the 'right' things were being done just so we could say everything possible had been done. I was in shock and disbelief and had fleeting thoughts of wanting to kill myself as I was starting to think that I could never

survive this. Ariel was dead, she was gone. We wrapped her body in a white polar fleece blanket and John & I took her into our bedroom where we sobbed and howled as we hugged her. One of the paramedics had taken Mercedes into her bedroom and was distracting her. Another stage of shock was realising that I needed to explain this to Mercedes and involve in the process. There was no point shielding her at this stage as she had witnessed the whole thing. I knelt down to Mercedes' height with Ariel in my arms and began to explain that she had died. I then went over to the couch in her play space and we sat there together and I placed Ariel on her lap so she could have a cuddle. Mercedes tried to lift Ariel's eyelids open as she tried to absorb the reality of her death at 3½ year old's level of understanding. We sat there holding her until the police arrived to make the official pronouncement of death. John was organising for Mercedes to stay overnight at a friend's house. The time came to get in the ambulance and ride to the hospital with my dead daughter in my arms. She had to be taken to the coroner's office in Melbourne, 90 minutes away, but I could be with her for as long as I needed in the bereavement room at the hospital. I just stared at the floor. I felt overwhelming shame. She was dead because of my negligence. At the hospital I curled up with Ariel on the couch. I kept rearranging the blanket as it was slipping off. Her body was getting colder and I kept trying to wrap her more snugly. Another shockwave of reality washed through me when I felt the rigamortos in her knee as I tried to put a nappy on her.

A nurse was coming in and out of the room trying to allow me the space I needed. She took some photos of us and also a handprint and footprint so she could compile them into a little keepsake book, which turned out to be beautiful. I was alone in the room with Ariel when I called my Mum in South Australia to tell her the news. It was one of the most horrible things I've ever had to do. I could have killed her on the spot too the way she started hyperventilating and stammered to get the words out to tell my Dad. I didn't speak to her long. I wanted to be with Ariel.

John turned up at the hospital some time later as did close friends Estelle (who works in oncology at the hospital) and her husband, Colin. I can't remember which order they arrived in. The shame was overwhelming and I couldn't speak to them or look at them, I felt so guilty for destroying such a beautiful, precious little life, a life that depended on me completely, and I wasn't up to the task. I remember Colin saying that they loved me but feeling so unworthy of such love. The time came where I was ready to say my first goodbye to Ariel and hand her over to the nurse to prepare her for her trip to the coroner in Melbourne. I kissed her and wrapped her extra snug. The nurse hesitated and asked if I would like one more cuddle and it made me feel anxious as I had already reached a certain decision in my mind to get to the point of being able to hand Ariel over, then the nurse was halting the survival process. I told her that if she gave Ariel back to me then I wouldn't be handing her over a second time and could she just leave. When we arrived home after returning from the hospital I was shocked to realise it was only 9.00pm. I was so tired and wrung out, it felt like 4.00am! I took a sleeping tablet, knowing I wouldn't have a hope of getting to sleep otherwise. Since it was still earlyish in the evening, John and I began ringing friends and relatives to let them what had happened. For the rest of the night we hardly slept and stayed up crying and talking to each other. We called one of the friends back

as we both felt strongly that she would be the ideal person to conduct Ariel's funeral service. She said she would be honoured which was a weight lifted.

I absolutely hope to reach a place of forgiveness and acceptance. I really want to work through the guilt or at least get to a level where I can live with it without feeling so tortured.

You never think it will be you or your family. I'm an avid reader and information gather, I'm a conscientious parent, I'm responsible and aware of many issues, and I'm also a counsellor with many years experience, but I'm also imperfectly, infallibly human and cannot control absolutely everything that happens. What happened to Ariel was an accident, yes it was preventable as all accidents are, but other circumstances surrounding were slightly non-standard for that day and often it's when we're out of routine that things can go wrong.

I could say a note to husbands/partners whose wife/partner is experiencing post-natal depression, post-traumatic stress and the like, and that is LISTEN to her and pay attention.

Particularly if she tends to get on with things because she doesn't want to make a fuss and look like she can't cope with the task of mothering and running the household. If she says she can't cope, it's not an understatement, it's probably ten times worse than what she's expressing. If she is expressing anxiety and asks for help then please help her. It will alleviate anxiety on a number of levels... firstly solving the urgency of the practical situation at hand, secondly reducing the tendency for accumulative stress and anxiety. The amount of times I have heard mothers' say they get distracted and forget the task at hand simply because there are a number of things to achieve at once, even when they're in the best of mental health, is staggering. One of my biggest struggles in dealing with anxiety was feeling like I wouldn't be believed.

Tracey (Ariel's Mum)