

# HELPING A CHILD COPE WHEN A GRANDPARENT DIES



For many children, the death of a grandparent is their first experience of bereavement. Others may be a bit more prepared having had a family pet or someone else that they know die. Dependant on their life experiences so far, the realisation that we die can be surprising and even shocking. Often a grandparent is a very important person in a child's life, and when they die children can struggle with feelings of loss and grief.

Children look to the adults around them for cues on how to react and behave. This first experience of loss and grief is an important life lesson, and can shape children's views on whether or not it is OK to talk about death and dying and to express emotions.

Parents of course have a great deal to manage themselves when their own parent dies. A parent will naturally be processing their own grief as well as the reactions and grief of their children.

Children, like adults, suffer when someone they love dies, and every child dealing with death needs and deserves the support of understanding adults. The death can be an opportunity for children to learn that they can handle sad things in life, giving them increased confidence and resilience for whatever lies ahead.

## KEY MESSAGES

- Answer a child's questions, keeping your answers as simple and straightforward as possible
- Do not feel that you must provide all the answers often you can't
- Do not feel that you can't share your own grief with your child – often it's helpful if you do. If your children understand that you are upset because their grandparent has died, your distress will be less concerning to them, and this can in turn give them 'permission' to show their sadness
- Understand that for some children, the outward expression of grief can be delayed
- Listen to what the child says and how he or she says it and try to follow them on their 'grief journey'
- Don't confuse young ones by using euphemisms for death such as 'rest' or 'sleep'. They might be waiting for their loved one to wake up! Help the child to understand that the deceased is not going to come back
- Reassure the child that death is not a form of punishment but a part of life. Explain that just like being born, dying is a part of the life cycle and that it is a natural and inevitable result of growing older
- Be sure that the child does not feel at fault
- Be patient and consistent with answers if a child asks the same questions over and over.



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## SOME THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

Give honest information - Despite a care givers instinct to protect their child, children who are not given honest information about the death of someone they love tell us that they feel angry and excluded, and sad that they were unable to mourn their loss alongside others affected by the death. If a child is going to attend a mourning service, care givers should go over what will happen so that the child is prepared. If there is going to be an open casket, let the child decide whether they want to view the body. If they do, arrange for it to be in the company of a calm adult. Prepare the child for the appearance of the body, saying that because the body is no longer working, it does not look the same. Prepare the child for the fact that some people at the service will be crying, but others may be laughing and talking, and that is their way of remembering the special person who has died.

Language they can understand - Explanations about the death should be given using language that the child can understand. Care givers should check back that the child has understood and make time for the questions they may need to ask. Avoid statements like 'Losing Grandpa' or 'Grandma is sleeping forever' as these will only confuse young children and perhaps build up anxieties about being lost themselves or about going to sleep. Explain that death and sleep are different. When someone dies they cannot do things they once did, like walking, talking, playing, eating etc. and they cannot feel anything any longer either, so they are not sad, hurting, cold, hungry or ill. Their body has stopped working which means they have died and they sadly will not be coming back.

Children who are dealing with the death of one Grandparent often logically wonder if they will lose other people they love. If you are a Grandparent helping a child deal with the death of another Grandparent, the child may worry that they will lose you as well.

Saying something simple such as, "I can't be sure but I expect to be here for a long time" can be comforting at a time when everything feels so uncertain.

Choices - Children need support to understand that grieving for the death of someone they love is normal, and that they can make choices about what would help them cope best at home and at school. The school should be informed to ensure they get the support they need.

Some children find comfort in the days following a death by looking at and carrying around pictures of the loved one. A special toy or memento associated with the deceased can be comforting. A child going through the grief process may become anxious, clingy or angry. They may complain of physical symptoms such as headaches or stomach-aches or have trouble concentrating in school. These behavioural changes will probably go away over time, and the consistent loving and non-judgemental support of adults can be very helpful whilst things feel very raw.



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## OTHER WAYS THAT A CARE GIVER CAN HELP

Often a parent or carer is grieving too, so may not always feel able to cope with their child's grief. It can be helpful if families can:

- Find time to reminisce together – sharing memories of happy times, looking at keepsakes or photographs, putting treasured personal items in a special memory box
- Reassure the child that nothing they said or did caused the death
- Keep routines and boundaries in place to encourage a sense of security
- Provide opportunities for playing, drawing or painting, reading
- Be patient with regressive behaviours
- Tell the child's school what has happened so they can offer support
- Acknowledge how sad and difficult some times are and ask the child what they think could help them
- Ask for advice or help from a health visitor, doctor, teacher as needed
- Ensure self-care – this is a tough time for the whole family, and if the adults look after themselves, they will be better able to take care of the children
- Using phrases like “Yes we are very sad and will miss Granny a lot, but it might help you to remember that we have lots of lovely memories of her. Can you remember when .....” can help the grief to feel less overwhelming.
- Hug your children as much as you can. Tell them you love them as much as you can. Demonstrate your love for them as much as you can. Let them talk as much as they need to. When they need to be quiet – sit with them in that quiet

