

# Grandparents Raising Grandchildren:



## Helping Your Grandchild Deal with the Death of a Parent

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**H**andling death is always a difficult process. Dealing with your grief stretches your emotional resources, and handling details such as a funeral and burial requires time and planning. For some grandparents, the death of an adult child also means that you must accept responsibility for raising grandchildren.

The stress of so many changes at once can be overwhelming for the entire family. Adults often do not know how to explain a death to children and are unprepared to help children handle their own grief over the loss of a parent. But with sensitivity and compassion, you can help your grandchildren learn to cope with the death, move through the stages of grief, and find productive ways to express their emotions.

### Understanding the Grieving Process

Grieving is a process of learning to accept the death of someone you love. Although each person handles death a little differently, most people do go through some predictable steps in their grief process. The following are the common stages of grief:

- **Denial.** When a person first learns of a death, a common reaction is to deny it. The first thoughts may be “this can’t be happening” or “this is only a bad dream.” Many people also feel anger, guilt, or resentment when a loved one dies. The denial stage tends to be fairly short, although feelings of guilt and resentment can linger into later stages of grieving.

- **Despair.** Once a person has gotten over the initial shock of a death, sadness and confusion often set in. In this stage, the reality of the death has been accepted, and the person is starting to realize that life will be forever different without the loved one. During this stage, anguish and depression are common reactions.

- **Detachment.** Depression can lead to feelings of loneliness, isolation, withdrawal, and indifference toward the world. Many people who are grieving temporarily lose interest in the world around them and want to withdraw from others. This is a normal step in the grief process.

- **Recovery.** The final stage of the grief process involves acceptance of the death. The person must acknowledge that the death has happened, and life must go on. This does not mean forgetting the person who has died—in many ways, life will never be the same without him or her. But a person who reaches the stage of recovery begins to take renewed interest in life and to move forward without the loved one.

Grief affects people in different ways and is different with each loss. Some people move through these stages fairly quickly and reach recovery and acceptance in a few weeks or months. Others spend a long time in one stage before continuing the grief process. Some people may work through their grief over one death in a few weeks or months, but spend months or years grieving another loss. Certain events, such as the anniversary of the death or a holiday, may prompt some people to return



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to an earlier stage of grief. No matter how painful it is, grieving the death of a loved one is an important process. Some people try to avoid the unpleasant emotions of grief by ignoring their feelings or acting as if nothing has changed. These people will never fully recover until they accept the death and grieve the loss of the loved one.

### How Children Learn to Understand Death

Like adults, children grieve when someone they love dies. Children who are handling the death of someone they love need adult support. How children understand death depends, in part, on their age. Here are some common reactions to death in children of different ages:

#### *Infants and Toddlers* (under 3 years):

Very young children cannot understand death, but they may recognize that someone important to them is no longer around. Many infants and toddlers respond to the stress of the adults around them. They may also be upset because their regular routine has changed after the death.

One way to help infants and toddlers is to keep their lives as normal as possible after the death. Have a caring and familiar adult (a neighbor or regular caregiver) take care of them during the first weeks after the death. Try to keep meals and bedtime routines as normal as possible. Provide gentle, loving discipline—toddlers may act out because the adults around them are upset. Explain the death in very simple words, such as “Daddy died.” As children get older, help them to remember the parent. Talk about things the child did with the parent. Show them pictures of the parent.

#### *Preschoolers* (3 - 5 years):

Preschoolers have a very basic understanding of death. They may recognize that body functions such as breathing stop when a person dies, and they may understand that a person who has died can't talk or eat or sleep any more. But most preschoolers are not able to understand that death is permanent. They tend to ask questions like, “When is Mommy coming back?” even after hearing repeatedly that she has died.

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**Children need support to work through the grieving process.**

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Preschoolers also may need to ask the same questions over and over in order to process the death. You can help children by answering their questions simply but honestly every time they ask them.

Make sure they have plenty of time for outdoor play. Physical activity can help young children release some of the stress over a parent's death.

#### *School-Agers* (6 years and up):

During the elementary years, most children learn to understand four basic facts about death: death is permanent; it can't be reversed; all life functions stop when a person dies; and death happens to every living thing. School-agers may express fear about their own death, because they have suddenly realized that they will die too.

Some school-age children may develop fears about death after a parent has died. They may worry that they did something to cause their parent to die. They may be afraid that they will die when they go to sleep. Or they may worry that they will die every time they get sick. You can help school-age children deal with these fears by encouraging them to share their worries and reassuring them.

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### **How to Help Children Who Are Grieving**

Children are sometimes forgotten during the immediate hours and days after a death. Adults who are dealing with their own grief may not have the emotional strength to help children deal with the death. Adults outside the family may avoid talking to the children about the death because they don't know what to say or are afraid of upsetting them. Some well-meaning but misguided adults try to protect children from death, either to spare them pain or because "they're too little to understand." Excluding children, especially when their parent has died, won't prevent them from feeling grief.

But keep in mind that children's grief is different from yours in some important ways. Young children do not understand that death is permanent. Some children act casual about a death because they do not really understand that the parent is not coming back. Children need support to work through the grieving process. As the grandparent who will be raising them, you will be one of the most important supports they have. Here are some ways to help children grieve the death of a parent:

- **Think about the words you use.** Telling children the truth about a parent's death is important, but remember that children take what you say literally. Don't tell children that a dead parent is "sleeping;" children may become afraid to go to sleep. Be cautious about telling children that Daddy died because he was sick. Stress that he was very, very, very sick—otherwise, children may think that routine illnesses could cause them to die.

- **Be honest about your feelings.** It's all right for your grandchildren to see you cry. Let

them know that you feel sad, angry, or lonely. Allow children to share their feelings and cry, but don't make them feel bad if they don't want or need to.

- **Give children words to explain their feelings.** Use words like "angry," "sad," and "lonely" to describe your own feelings. These words may help children tell you how they feel. Reading children's books about death may help your grandchildren learn how to explain their feelings. (See "Children's Books about Death.")

- **Give children non-verbal ways to express themselves.** Music, dance, writing, art, and even physical play can be good outlets to express negative feelings. Some children express themselves better with actions than with words.

- **Assure them that they will always be taken care of.** Let them know that they have a safe place to live in your home.

- **Share your religious beliefs, but remember that young children take what you say literally.** Saying "God loved Mommy so much that He took her to Heaven" may make young children believe that they are also going to die, because God loves them.

- **Help children memorialize the parent.** Taking flowers to the cemetery, planting a tree for the parent, talking about the parent, or keeping photos of the parent in the child's room are good ways to help children remember.

- **Know that children's grief has cycles.** Many children re-experience grief as they enter new stages of development. A preschooler who has



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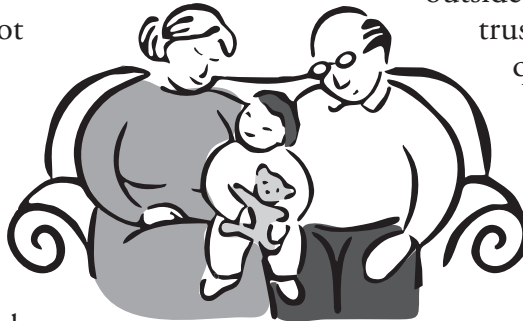
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grieved the death of a parent may experience that grief again as she begins school, when she starts middle school, when she graduates from high school, and so on.

### **Should Children Attend a Parent's Funeral?**

Many adults worry that children will be frightened by funerals. Are your grandchildren old enough to attend their parent's funeral? The answer depends on their age and maturity. For many children, the rituals of a funeral, memorial service, burial service and visitation can give them comfort. They will have chances to hear other people talk about their parent and to share their grief with others. Children also learn how to handle their grief by watching the adults around them.

Many children actually get a lot out of a funeral or memorial service. If your grandchildren are in elementary school or older, they are probably old enough to get comfort from attending the service. If your grandchildren are younger, you will need to decide whether they should attend the funeral. You might consider having them attend the parts they will understand best, such as the burial. Children should not be forced to attend if they do not want to, and they should be allowed to leave during the service if they become frightened.



Children who are prepared beforehand are less likely to be frightened by a visitation, funeral, or burial because they know what to expect. Children need to know what a casket is and need to realize that it will be buried in the ground. It is especially important to prepare them ahead if there is a viewing of the body. Let them know that the parent will be lying in the casket. They will be able to look at and touch the parent, but he or she will not be breathing and will not be able to respond to them.

Family members who are dealing with their own grief may not be able to focus on the child's needs during the visitation, funeral, and burial. It may be helpful to enlist someone outside the family whom the child trusts to be with the child, answer questions, and offer support during the services.

### **In Summary**

Helping grandchildren deal with their grief over the death of a parent is not easy. The children need to know that you are there for them, that they are safe, and that they can express their feelings. As a grandparent, you play an important role in helping them through the grieving process, even as you are dealing with your own grief. Remember that you are not alone. You can call on others to support you and your grandchildren during this difficult process.

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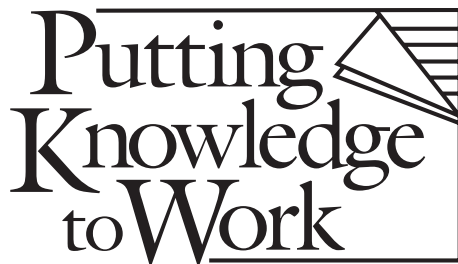
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