

Death of a Grandparent

The death of a grandparent may be one of the first experiences a child has of death in their family. As well as feelings of sadness, the death may also result in feelings of insecurity as children realise that people they love can die.

There are a number of factors that can affect the way in which a child responds to the death of a grandparent, these include:

- the age of the child and the length of the relationship with their grandparent
- the nature of the relationship
- the role the grandparent played in the child's life
- the way other family members cope with their grief
- the cause of death
- whether the death was sudden or anticipated

Grandparents often play a unique role in their grandchildren's lives and children of all ages can be affected by their death. Many children see grandparents as people they can talk to and share their worries with. They may have provided regular childcare and, in the case of single parents, they may have taken on the role of the absent parent. For younger children grandparents are often the people who gave them special treats and lots of attention.

Children express their grief in different ways to adults, they can move from displaying intense sadness to laughing and playing in a short space of time. Crying and showing sadness in front of children will help validate sad feelings they may have and allow them to freely express their emotions. Talking to children about why you are sad also helps to open up opportunities for them to ask questions.

However, adult grief can be overwhelming and all consuming. It is important that children are given the opportunity to focus on their day to day life and normal routines, away from adult grief. It is important for parents to be aware that the way they deal with their emotions will have an impact on how their children cope.

When a child loses a grandparent, it follows that one of their parents has lost their mother or father. The loss of a parent can be devastating, with the grief being felt in different longer-term ways. Whilst children will grieve for the loss of their grandparent, they are more likely to adapt to the loss more quickly than their parent.

There may be altered behaviour from children as they adjust to changes in their life brought about by the death. There may be practical changes such as new childcare arrangements to adjust to, alongside emotional changes as they cope with the emotional impact on their parents.

Parents can help by offering extra support and reassurance, letting them know that they are still safe and cared for. It can also help to share happy memories, reflecting on how fortunate everyone was to have had that time together.

Children may find it helpful to express their emotions in a variety of ways, these could include:

- Making a memory book or box
- Drawing
- Reading stories
- Writing

Please see our 'Helping Children to Make Memory Boxes or Books' sheet for more detailed information about supporting your child with this process.

For parents, it is important to remember that it is them who are the bereaved child. Parents need to take care of themselves, visit the GP if necessary, or go to Cruse (www.cruse.org.uk). Please see separate self-help sheet.

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