
Helping Your Grandchildren Deal with the Death of a Parent

Handling death is always a difficult process. Experiencing grief stretches your emotional resources, and organizing 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. Many adults do not know how to explain a death to children and are unprepared to help children grieve the loss of a parent. With sensitivity and compassion, you can help your grandchildren learn to cope with the death, better understand their own grief, and find productive ways to express their emotions.

Understanding Grieving

Grieving is a process of learning to accept the death of someone you love and integrating that loss into your life. Although each person handles death a little differently, a variety of reactions—physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual—can arise when you're grieving.

The dual-process model of grief was developed to help explain what grief looks like. The model shows that grief is not a simple process that can be defined by neat stages. Rather, grief involves alternating between two processes: loss orientation (focused on the death) and restoration orientation (focused on moving forward with life). It is normal, even healthy, to switch back and forth between these two experiences multiple times during your grief journey. Here are some of the common experiences following the death of a loved one based on these processes:

- Loss-oriented processes: Feeling like grief is relentless, trying to better understand your grief, understanding your new relationship with the person who died, avoiding responsibilities, and trying to work through your grief.
- Restoration-oriented processes: Denying grief exists, avoiding grief altogether, taking care of family finances after the death, trying to do new things, and finding distractions from grief.

Grief affects people in different ways and is different with each loss. Some people may work through their grief over one death in a few months but spend many months or years grieving another loss. Grief does not progress in a linear fashion. It can be a messy and difficult process. Certain events, such as the anniversary of the death or a holiday, may prompt some people to remember the death and return to loss orientation, even long after the death.

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 to help them understand and accept the death. How children understand death depends, in part, on their age. Here are some common reactions to death in children of different ages:

Infants (Birth - 18 Months)

Like all children, infants grieve, but their grief looks different. Very young children cannot understand death, but they may recognize that someone important to them is no longer around. They may experience the absence of the person who died as abandonment. Grieving infants may display excessive crying or overall irritability. Help infants grieve by keeping their daily routines the same after the death. Provide comfort when infants are overly fussy by hugging and cuddling them.

Toddlers (under 3 years)

Toddlers respond to the stress of the adults around them. They may be upset because their regular routine has changed after the death, even if they do not understand why. One way to help toddlers grieve 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. 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. No matter how painful it is, grieving the death of a loved one is an important process.

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, 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. Preschoolers may need to ask the same questions over and over in order to process the death. You can help preschoolers grieve 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-age children (6 - 12 years)

During the elementary school 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.

Adolescents (13 years and older)

Adolescents have a better understanding of death than younger children. They understand that death is irreversible, that the body stops functioning when a person dies, that death happens to everyone, and that death has a cause. They can think deeply about what happens when we die. They may rely on their personal and spiritual beliefs to make sense of a death. Many adolescents show heightened negative emotions after the death of a loved one. They may engage in risky behaviors, even if they have not done so before. Adolescents' grief also may look like frequent mood swings. Remember that adolescents rely on their peers. Allow your teenage grandchild time with their friends in a safe setting. Do not be alarmed if they confide in their friends about the death but don't want to talk with you.

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 think the children are 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 adults' grief 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:

Be thoughtful 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—they 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 younger children tell you how they feel. Reading children's books about death may help your grandchildren learn how to explain their feelings. See the “Children's Books about Death” section below for suggestions.

Give children nonverbal 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 always will 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 that “God loved Mommy so much that He took her to Heaven” may make young children believe that they are also going to die, since God loves them.

Help children memorialize the parent.

Good ways to help children remember include taking flowers to the cemetery, planting a tree for the parent, creating a memory box with photos and reminders of the parent, and talking about the parent.

Know that children's grief has cycles.

Many children re-experience grief as they enter new stages of development. A preschooler who has 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.

Excluding children won't prevent them from feeling grief over the death of a parent. Many children get a lot out of a funeral or memorial service. If your grandchildren are elementary-school-age or older, they probably are 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.

Prepare your grandchildren in advance. 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. If the parent was cremated, they need to know that the urn or box contains ashes from the body. 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 a casket. They will be able to look at and touch the parent, but they 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 answer questions, be with the child, 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.

Some Children's Books About Death

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