



When a grandparent dies

Children, like adults, suffer when someone they love dies. Often a grandparent is a very important person in a child's life, and when they die children can often struggle with their feelings of loss and grief. You may find the following information helpful when thinking about how you can support your child in their grief.

What do children need?:

- **Honest information.** Despite your instinct to protect your child from distressing information, 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 their parents.
- **Language they can understand.** Explanations about the death should be given using language that your child can understand given their age and ability. Check back that they have understood your words and make time for the questions that they need to ask. Avoid statements like "Losing Grandpa or "Grandma is sleeping forever" as these will only confuse young children and perhaps build up anxiety about being lost themselves or fear of going to sleep. You can explain that death and sleep are different – when someone dies this means that they cannot do things as they once did like walking, talking, playing, shopping etc. and they cannot feel anything any longer either, so they are not sad, hurting, cold, hungry or ill.
- **Choices.** Children need your help to understand that grieving for the death of someone they love is normal, and to make choices about what would help them cope best at home and at school. Tell their teacher what has happened to ensure they get the support they need at school.

How children might react:

All children will react differently, but there are certain common factors which will tell you that your child is suffering more perhaps than they are able to tell you. Often young children do not have the language to express how they are feeling and so you must let their behaviour be your guide. You know your child and if you find they begin to behave out of character, it may be that they are struggling to understand and come to terms with the loss of someone that they love. Some of the most common reactions to bereavement are:

Pre-school children:

- Do not understand permanency of death, so show little or no reaction to the news.
- May react more to a sense of loss – of someone not being around anymore.
- May be affected more by changes resulting from how you manage your grief.
- Will often search for the missing person and expect them to appear again.
- Ask the same questions repeatedly to try and make sense of what has happened.
- May have difficulty settling to play, sleep or eat or show brief episodes of sadness.
- May regress in behaviours for a while.

- May find starting school difficult as they may well feel additionally anxious about leaving you now that someone they love has gone from their lives

Primary school children:

- Begin to understand more about death and its long term implications.
- Can only sustain grief for short periods – need opportunities for play.
- May feel guilty that something they said or did caused the death.
- May show a “morbid” fascination with the facts about the death.
- May be anxious about separating from you in case something happens to you.
- May be more prone to minor infections or tummy aches or headaches.
- May be restless, unable to concentrate at school.
- May be prone to sudden tearful or angry outbursts.
- May have difficulty settling at night.

Adolescent age children:

- Are more able to express their feelings verbally.
- Are more likely to dwell on issues of life and death.
- May go a bit “wild” to blot out the pain or show signs of depression.
- May have difficulty eating or sleeping.

How you can help:

Remember you are grieving too so may not always feel able to cope with your child’s grief. However, don’t worry, it is important that they know that you are affected by the death too so that feelings can be shared and comfort given. It is also helpful if you can:

- Find time to reminisce together – sharing memories of happy times looking at keepsakes or photographs, putting treasured personal items in a memory box.
- Reassure your 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 – this might give you insight into what your child is feeling.
- Be patient with regressive behaviours – they will pass.
- Tell your child’s teacher what has happened so they can offer support.
- Acknowledge how sad and difficult some times are and ask your child what could help them – this encourages them to develop coping strategies, and increases self confidence.
- Ask for advice or help from your health visitor, doctor, teacher as needed.
- Look after yourself – this is a tough time for you too and caring for yourself will better enable you to take care of your child.