

Helping Grandchildren Deal With Grief

We all want what's best for our grandchildren. We want to keep them safe. We want to protect them from pain and sadness. We'd like them to stay as innocent as they were on the day they were born.

Unfortunately, we can't keep bad things from happening to those we love. Before they reach adulthood, many children will experience a major loss that will cause them intense pain. Their parents may divorce. A parent, sibling or other loved one may die after a long illness or an accident. These events can turn a child's world upside down. Some grandchildren grieve because a parent is in jail, addicted to drugs, or abusive. These children often feel abandoned. They go through a grieving process similar to that experienced by children whose parents have died.



- Act younger than they are by wetting the bed or sucking their thumb (if they didn't before).
- Blame themselves for a death or the fact that a parent can't take care of them.
- Play make-believe games about death and dying.

There is no timetable for grieving. Behaviors should improve as the child moves through the grieving process. If the behavior persists, consider seeking outside help. Getting this help is particularly important if the child:

- Talks about "joining" the person who has died.
- Has a dramatic decline in school performance.
- Becomes involved with drugs or alcohol.
- Won't or can't connect with others.
- Has nightmares or trouble sleeping for an extended period.

Normal Reactions – and Causes for Worry

Children often have trouble accepting that a death has occurred or that a parent has abandoned them. They don't quite know what to do about the pain they feel. They miss the person who is gone. They worry about who will take care of them. And they do all of this with the immature emotions of a child. Children who are grieving need plenty of help from all the adults in their lives, including their grandparents.

For a certain period of time, it's normal for a grieving grandchild to:

- Feel depressed or anxious.
- Act out or become angry.

The Way Children Mourn

Children grieve differently than adults do. First, children don't show grief all the time. Many children will seem upset only sometimes – and for short periods of time. Don't let this fool you. It doesn't mean that a child has "gotten over" his or her grief. It just means that the child can't focus on these intense emotions for very long. This is the mind's way of protecting the child from being overwhelmed by strong emotions.

Don't be surprised if a child takes longer to finish grieving than you do. Children may need to mourn over and over again. They might return to their grief each time they enter a new stage of their lives.

How children respond to loss will depend on their age. An infant won't understand the concept of death. But he or she will sense – and be upset by – the emotional tension that the family is experiencing. A preschooler may understand something about death. But he or she may see death as a kind of sleep. This child may believe that the deceased person is coming back.

As children get older, they begin to understand the possibility of their own deaths. Beginning at age 6, they become afraid of dying. As they get older, they begin to see death as something that is final and something that happens to everyone.

Teenagers often have a very hard time with grief. They may look like adults, but they are still children at heart. Don't expect them to be strong or to support other family members during this time. Instead, try to give them as much support as possible. If you can't provide that support, see if you can get the teen to talk with a school counselor, therapist or another caring adult.

What Can You Do to Help?

Grandparents are in a good position to “be there” for a grandchild who has lost a loved one. If other members of the family are caught up in grief, they may not notice what the child is going through. As a grandparent, you can focus on the child and make sure he or she gets needed support.

References

[AARP on Grief and Loss](http://www.aarp.org/families/grief_loss/)

www.aarp.org/families/grief_loss/

[Children and Grief](http://www.hospicenet.org/html/children.html)

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[National Cancer Institute – Loss, Grief and Bereavement](http://www.cancer.gov/cancerinfo/pdq/supportivecare/bereavement)

www.cancer.gov/cancerinfo/pdq/supportivecare/bereavement

[Rainbows, Inc.](http://www.rainbows.org)

www.rainbows.org

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Here are some tips for helping a grieving grandchild:

- Talk about what has happened. Be calm and quiet. Tell the truth and keep it simple. Answer questions honestly. Make sure the child understands your answer.
- Be patient. Children often need to have things repeated. You may have to answer the same question more than once.
- Share your own feelings about the loss. Ask the child to share feelings too. You may have to help the child put feelings into words. Drawing pictures and playing with dolls may help.
- Help the child remember the person who is gone. If a loved one has died, involve the child in the funeral, if he or she wants to be involved. But be sure to prepare the child for what will happen during the ceremony. If a parent is in jail, help the child write letters or take the child to visit the prison. If a parent has abandoned the child, make sure the child knows this isn't his or her fault.

You can't protect your grandchildren from sadness. But you can help them mourn and move on. Your support will let your grandchildren know that they are not alone. Your understanding will help your grandchildren understand and cope with the terrible thing that has happened to them. And your love will reassure your grandchildren that there will always be someone who cares about them and wants to take care of them.

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