

When a Grandparent Dies...

Most kids lose a grandparent at some point in their lives. A grandparent's illness and death can disrupt daily routines and send family emotions into high gear. Children who are too young to understand the complexities of what's going on, use their behavior to tell us—the adults in their life—that they're having difficulty dealing with the change. But as we go through our own inner turmoil, we often temporarily and unavoidably neglect our children's emotional needs.

Grandparents link us to our past. Whether they care for our children regularly, see them only at special visits, or communicate via cards, phone, or Internet, they play a unique role in our kids' lives. How we as parents guide our youngsters through their grandparents' deaths becomes a hallmark for other important emotional events our children will experience as they grow up. Equally important, their memories of Nana or Grampy offer them a legacy of their past and a richness of life experience that they will hold forever.

Guidelines for Grieving

What's more, children are very impressionable. Your child will remember how you handled her grandparents' deaths, and in the future, she will model her own grief on these teachable moments from her childhood. To help you navigate through this difficult period and provide your child with important coping skills, consider the following guidelines:

- **DO** describe in simple terms what's going on. As a grandparent's health declines, prepare your child for the changes she is likely to see and experience. For example, "Nana can no longer walk on her own so she uses a walker to help her" or "Have you noticed that Grampy sleeps a lot now? He takes lots of medicines that keep him comfortable, but make him sleepy."
- **DO** take your child to visit her grandparent in the hospital. Children, even those as young as 3 years, can benefit from this experience because the mystery and secrecy surrounding a serious illness are often more frightening than the reality. Just be sure to prepare her for what she will see and hear. For example, tell her if Grandma has a roommate or if she is likely to see Grandpa with an IV needle or a breathing tube. Talk about the unusual smells and sounds she may notice. And let her know how she should act during the visit: "Grampy will be tired, so he probably won't want to play, and he may want to rest quietly." If a grandparent's behavior, personality changes, or mood swings could confuse or frighten your child, reconsider a visit. Instead, spend some time with your child drawing pictures of Nana or making audiotapes of the songs and stories Grampy used to sing and tell.
- **DO** find ways for your child to help as a grandparent's health declines. This is critical. Even 2 1/2- or 3-year-olds like to be involved in helping. It makes them feel like an important part of the caring and giving process.



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- **DO** prepare your child for a grandparent's imminent death. If you have told your youngster that Grandma's health is failing, she is likely to ask the inevitable but painful question, "Is my Nana going to die?" Although it may seem counter-intuitive, the best way to protect your child's emotional health is to share information that will affect her. Answer truthfully ("Yes, I think that Nana will die soon"); never lie to a child. Then reassure your child that you will help her face this event, and that you'll go through it together as a family. Of course, exactly how and what you tell your child will depend on how old she is, how much she can understand, how she's likely to react, and whether she's experienced similar losses before.
- **DO** find teachable moments from the experiences of friends or neighbors. Point out how the families returned to their normal routines after a grandparent's death. Children's television shows and movies often include themes that relate to illness and / or death. Watch with your child and discuss what happens, so when the inevitable occurs, it will be easier for her to understand and cope.
- **DO** express your own authentic grief in front of your child. It's good for her to see that it's okay to be sad. Then be sure to explain what you're feeling (sad, angry, exhausted) and reassure her that you are still there to care for her even as you mourn. This is an important distinction that your child needs to hear often.
- **DO** encourage your child to participate in the memorial service, shivah, or other family ritual at the time of death if she is old enough to be able to make sense of the event. (If she can verbalize her understanding of what's going on — "We are saying good-bye to Nana" — she is probably ready to participate.) Be sure to explain in simple terms what's going to happen. If she's too young to understand, seems anxious or confused, or says that she doesn't want to go, leave her in the care of a familiar adult.
- **DON'T** assume that just because your child is young, the illness or death of a grandparent won't affect her. Your child watches, listens, and learns from you. The information she overhears while you are talking to family, friends, or doctors (including when you're on the phone) can be confusing, frightening, and overwhelming.
- **DON'T** overload your youngster with information. She will let you know what she needs to know, how much, and when, if you simply listen to her.
- **DON'T** try to be the perfect parent. You are being called upon to be a son or daughter, a sibling, a caregiver, and a parent all at once during the most stressful of life's events. Try to be available to your child at family meals and bedtime, but don't hesitate to ask friends and relatives for help while you mourn.



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Promoting Healthy Social Behaviors in Child Care Centers