



Supporting children and young people when a grandparent has died

INFORMATION FOR PARENTS AND CARERS



Grief support for
children and young people
in Oxfordshire



Who this booklet is for

This booklet is designed to help parents and carers as they support their children or young people following the death of a grandparent. For many children a grandparent dying might be their first experience of death, so the booklet starts very practically – helping adults think about how to explain to children and young people that a grandparent has died. These initial conversations and the language used in them are crucial in helping children understand what has happened. At a time when adults may be grieving too the booklet also gives some simple advice about how to support a child or young person in the early days after the death and in the months ahead.



SeeSaw is a small, independent Oxfordshire charity founded in 2000 to provide grief support for local children, young people and their families, or those who care for them. We provide advice, information, resources, consultation, training and support for schools and, when appropriate, face-to-face support sessions for children and young people, usually in their own homes. We offer telephone advice and resources to enable family members and professionals to provide the support. Often we help them to find the right words, or to understand that a child's reaction is very normal for their age, or how to think about the situation from a child's point of view.

Introduction

As a parent or carer you may wonder how you are going to support your child while at the same time managing your own feelings about the death of your mother, father or other significant adult. A grandparent dying may be the first experience of death that children and young people encounter, so it's not surprising that it can be a difficult time.

This booklet has some helpful advice about talking to your child and how your child may react to the death. It also has some ideas and resources to help you support your child.



Children's relationships with grandparents

Over the years the role of grandparents has changed considerably and today many grandparents play an important role in childcare arrangements, looking after their grandchildren after school and in school holidays. Families often tell us that a grandparent was like a father or mother figure to the child. The type of relationship a child has with their grandparent can be key to how they react when their grandparent dies.

Where grandparents have been ill at home or in hospital children may have been involved in caring for them alongside their parents. This can mean that very young children may have been exposed to medical information and procedures that have been confusing or upsetting for them.

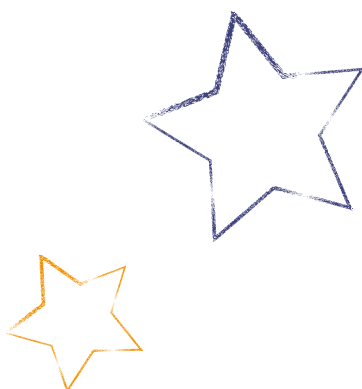
Adolescents can sometimes have a close relationship with grandparents as they can provide a non-judgemental space to escape to. Even if time spent with grandparents is limited many young people have fond childhood memories that mean they hold grandparents in high regard.

Where contact with grandparents is less regular, perhaps because of geography, the death may not have such an immediate impact for children. Special occasions like holidays, Christmas, birthdays and family events are where the loss may be more evident and may result in a delayed grief reaction.

The cause of the death

As with any death, some are expected while others happen without warning. A grandparent may die following an illness or a period in hospital and this might provide an opportunity to prepare the child for the death, or a way of explaining why the person has died. If the death

is sudden it can take time for the news, and what it means, to be absorbed. Children will pick up on their parents' feelings of shock and distress in reaction to the death, and they will need help to understand what has happened and why the person has died.



How children and young people may react

There are many different factors that affect how children and young people respond to the death of a grandparent, for example:

- the child's age
- the relationship they had with the grandparent
- the grandparent's role in the child's life
- the cause of the death and if it was sudden or expected
- their experience of previous deaths or losses
- prior or secondary losses: e.g. previous losses, home, financial, family, locality
- how others are coping with the death, particularly their own parent(s)
- communication within the family and opportunities to discuss memories and express feelings

- different religions and traditions may have their own rituals or expectations about how grief is expressed

Where a grandparent's death is the child's first experience of someone dying they will look to the adults around them to see how to react and respond. If the message they receive is that it is ok to talk, they will be more relaxed about asking questions. If they see that it's ok to get upset and they know the reasons why, they are more likely to be able to express their own feelings.

When children have experienced the death of a pet they may be more aware of the feelings and language associated with death and the 'goodbye rituals' that take place. This may be a helpful experience to draw on when talking about a grandparent's death.



Talking to children

- When someone has died children need age-appropriate information that is open and honest.
- Be careful to use the words dead or died. However hard it is to say “Grandma has died” it is always better than saying “Grandma has gone to sleep” or “We’ve lost Grandma.” These euphemisms can be really confusing for children and may make them fearful of going to sleep or anxious that they too might get lost.
- Explain to young children that when someone dies their body stops working and they can no longer do what they used to do like walking and talking etc. Explain that they don’t feel anything any longer so they are not sad or hurting, cold or hungry.
- Be consistent with messages and ensure that other family members, friends, carers and teachers know what you have told the children so that they can say the same thing.
- Be aware that children may be paying attention to the conversations of the adults around them, including telephone conversations. Even when children seem to be busy playing they may be listening and what they hear can be confusing and misleading for them.
- For some children this first encounter with death can lead to unusually clingy and anxious behaviours as they realise that other people they know might die too.
- Talking to children about the cycle of life can be helpful. Explain how growing old and dying are part of living and being born. Emphasise the importance of living. This is where talking about the memories of the person who has died can be really helpful.

★ **For more detailed information see our guidelines ‘Talking to children when someone has died’ – available from www.seesaw.org.uk**

★ **Book choice: ‘Lifetimes’ by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen. This picture book for young children, talks about beginnings, endings and lifetimes in between as it explores the themes in relation to plants, animals and people.**



How does a child’s age affect their reaction?

Children will react to the death of a grandparent in different ways according to their age.

Very young children 0–2 years

Reactions:

Very young children and babies will react to a sense of loss rather than the death itself. They may be affected by the changes in the emotional atmosphere around them. Sad faces may replace the normally smiling faces of carers at feed time. Babies and very young children may respond to this sense of change by becoming more clingy and fractious.

How you can help them:

- maintain a regular routine
- where possible ensure consistency of carers both at home and, if appropriate, at the nursery
- provide lots of cuddles and reassurance

Children 3–5 years

Reactions:

Children of this age think in very concrete terms so abstract language around death is very confusing. Using euphemisms to explain that their grandparent has died, to soften the news, will add to the confusion so avoid words like lost, gone to sleep, passed away. Instead simply say that the person “has died and that means we won’t be able to see them any more.” Young children often use the word dead but that doesn’t mean that they understand the concept or permanence of death. Despite frequent telling young children will still often ask when the person is coming back. These repeated questions can be very hard for grieving adults and older siblings to manage.

At this stage children will show how they are feeling through their behaviour, such as becoming very clingy on hearing that their grandparent has died, especially if the grandparent played a significant role in the child’s life. They may even reject the attention of other carers. This can result in some regressive and anxious behaviours, temper tantrums, bedwetting and often reluctance to go to bed alone. Children will show signs of sadness but only for short periods before escaping into play, acting out events through their play.

How you can help them:

- strong familiar routines
- lots of reassurance
- repetition of short phrases telling the story of what happened – “Do you remember I told you that sadly Grandad was ill and died and we won’t see him again.”
- consistency of simple language used in the family and at nursery
- verbal and non-verbal expressions of affection and reassurance



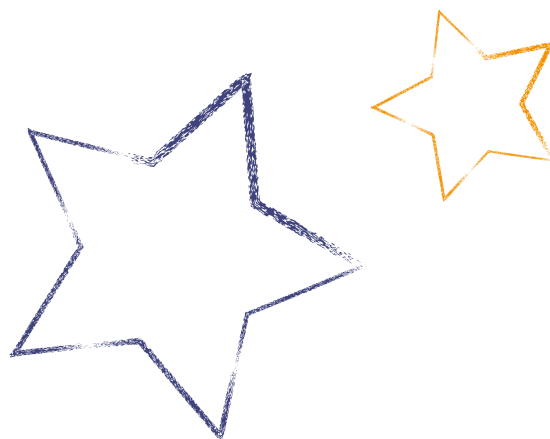
Primary age children 6–9 years

Reactions:

At this stage children may have a greater understanding that death is final. The death of a grandparent may make children afraid that other another member of the family may die. This may lead to separation anxiety, especially when the main carer isn't available. Children of this age often ask lots of questions; they may use the right words but not necessarily fully understand them. They can sometimes even feel that something they did or said contributed to the death, known as 'magical thinking'. This can lead to feelings of guilt, which children may not talk about but can contribute to changes in behaviour. It may be expressed as anxiety, aggression, nightmares, regressive behaviours and withdrawal. Children will move in and out of their grief, sometimes attributing feelings of sadness to the death rather than to being upset for some other reason.

How you can help them:

- stick to familiar routines and boundaries
- give clear, honest, age-appropriate answers to questions. If a child asks a question they are ready for an answer. Check out what the child is actually asking – don't make assumptions
- use phrases like "I wonder...", "Tell me a bit more what you are thinking..."
- help children to understand and express complex feelings associated with grief
- seeing adults grieve will help children model their own grief reactions
- give lots of reassurance



Children 9–12 years

Reactions:

By this age children fully understand the finality of death and begin to fear death for themselves as well as others. This can lead to a range of worries and sleep problems. As children get older they may want a more detailed explanation about the death which can sometimes worry adults. While they are able to articulate their feelings they may be overwhelmed by their emotions of grief and express their feelings through tears, angry outbursts and fighting. Where the death coincides with the onset of early puberty mood swings are likely.

How you can help them:

- stick to familiar routines
- be clear about family boundaries
- use careful language in explaining events
- normalise grief reactions and reassure them it won't always feel like this
- be available to talk, acknowledging your own feelings so children don't feel they have to protect you or you them
- offer space and time to talk about the grandparent who has died, beginning to build memories
- involve them in planning the funeral and support them if they want to contribute on the day

Adolescents 13–18 years

Reactions:

With so many changes already taking place in an adolescent's life the death of a grandparent they care about can lead to a potent mix of emotions and unfamiliar behaviours.

Like adults, adolescents understand that death is final, and will often grieve for future milestones where their grandparent will be missing, such as graduations, learning to drive, getting married etc. They will have a greater understanding of the impact and implications of the death on their own parent(s) and may try to take on inappropriate caring roles.

Adolescents may resist grieving outwardly or talking about their feelings. This will often be in line with their temperament. A young person who doesn't normally express their feelings may appear withdrawn and as if they aren't grieving. But a young person who is usually open about how they are feeling is more likely to have the appropriate language to express their grief and want to talk about it. Both young people will be grieving but expressing their grief in different ways. Recognising that these grief reactions are normal can help adults to respond to the needs of the young people in a family.

Young people will want to know the details of what happened and to be involved in what happens next. This will include wanting to be involved in plans for the funeral, communication with school and other issues that affect the family and their future.

Friendships will be important in providing times of normality and respite from the intense feelings of grief. It can be a difficult time for bereaved youngsters, as they want to appear 'normal' with their peers in spite of what's happened. Sometimes in response to their grief young people's behaviour changes – they may start taking risks or cutting themselves off. Or they may become extremely focused on studies or work as a means of blotting out the pain. At this stage parents can find it difficult to recognise what is bereavement and what is normal adolescent behaviour.

How you can help them:

- help to normalise grief reactions
- reassurance
- support – appropriate to their needs
- accept their mood swings while still holding reasonable boundaries
- be available to talk to if and when they want to, or suggest someone else
- involve them in discussions and decisions
- give them choices
- involve them in how things are managed – school, funeral, home
- help them to develop coping strategies
- give them opportunities to engage with their peer group – permission to have fun
- recognise that not all their responses will be about the bereavement



"It's a lot easier to put your sadness into anger... I almost broke my hand when I punched a wall."

14 year old

Taking children to a grandparent's funeral

Parents and carers often wonder whether or not to take their child to a grandparent's funeral, and friends and relatives can offer different advice about whether or not it is appropriate. This can make the decision more difficult. There is no right or wrong answer to this it will depend on your family beliefs and knowing your child. Children, even very young children, can be prepared for what will happen at a funeral and be given the choice about attending. If children are given enough information and allowed to choose they will often say they want to attend, as it's an opportunity for them to say goodbye to their grandparent and is part of the next stage of coming to terms with what has happened. Children can feel excluded if they aren't given the choice.

We can prepare children by:

- Talking about what will happen at the funeral and explaining that it is the time for saying goodbye to their grandparent.
- Involving children in planning the funeral – choosing songs, music, readings, poems, flowers. Children sometimes write a letter or poem about their grandparent and want to read it during the funeral. Invite someone the child knows well to support them in case at the last minute they aren't able to manage it.
- Taking children to see where the funeral will take place, or showing them a picture.
- Explaining that at the funeral some people may be crying because they are very sad, and that some people may also tell funny stories about their grandparent so they may laugh as well.
- Outlining to the children what will happen during the day and who might be there.
- Taking a bag of activities they can do quietly during the funeral or arranging for someone the children know well to take them out if they get upset. This will help you if you are overwhelmed by your own grief.
- Letting children know that it's ok not to go to the funeral or to leave if it's too much. Think about other ways for them to say goodbye like visiting the grave or a favourite shared place. Lighting a candle or blowing bubbles are other options.

★ A booklet for children called 'What happens when someone dies' is available free from SeeSaw. The booklet is to help adults explain to children in simple language and pictures what happens after someone dies. It also helps to explain to children about a cremation or a burial.



Family life beyond the funeral

Parents have a great deal to manage when their own parent or carer dies, and yet how they grieve will often affect the way their children manage their own grief. Sad as it might be when a grandparent has died, many children will still have two parents to take care of them on a daily basis. However, it's easy to assume that children are experiencing the same level of pain and sadness as their parent. It's important to remember that the relationship the child had with their grandparent, however close, will be different, as will their grief response.

Unlike adults, children will dip in and out of their grief, and although it is difficult to see children struggle with sad feelings there is no magic wand to make it feel better. Reassurance, understanding, talking and time are key to the grief journey for children. How parents and carers model this will be crucial. This is why at SeeSaw we say that it is important for adults to take care of themselves in order to look after their children. This might be by seeking professional support through grief counselling with a charity like Cruse Bereavement Care (www.oxfordcruse.co.uk).

What children need:

- **Reassurance.** Reassure children that grief is made up of many feelings. It is ok to cry, to be sad, angry or worried. Talk together about safe ways of expressing feelings, especially angry feelings – like kicking a football, hitting a pillow, or screwing up paper.
- **Familiar routines and boundaries.** Some of the child's everyday routines may have involved their grandparent. Be clear and reassuring about any changes such as school pick-ups and after-school care.
- **Be there.** Grieving children need support and presence more than advice. Not displaying grief through tears or angry outbursts doesn't mean that the grief has gone away.
- **Be available.** Touch can sometimes say what words can't, so hugs can provide reassurance.
- **Patience.** Be patient with yourself and your child. It's ok for your child to know that you are sad too. Children will avoid talking if they think it will make you upset.
- **Honesty.** Children may continue to ask questions months after their grandparent has died. Answer questions honestly and age appropriately. Give information in bite-size pieces and check that the child has understood.
- **Listen.** Grieving children often need to tell their stories repeatedly. Listen without judgement or interruption.
- **Provide times of fun.** Grief can be exhausting. Children need to know that it is ok to have fun and to play and do normal activities. Having fun doesn't mean that they have forgotten their grandparent.
- **Build memories.** Remembering can be healing so offer opportunities to talk about their grandparent. Look at photographs together, tell funny stories, and remember special times as well as the difficult ones.
- **Believe in the child's ability to recover and grow.** Your hope and faith in their ability to recover may be needed when theirs fails.



Troubleshooting

When someone dies children's reactions can initially seem as though the death has had little or no impact on them. However, in the weeks and months ahead reactions may become more apparent, often expressed in a change of behaviour. Understanding what's happening and supporting children will be key to ensuring that the behaviour doesn't become a more long-standing problem.

At first it can be helpful to think about what the child's behaviour was like before their grandparent died, as this may be a clue as to whether it's related to their death or some other factor. Previous behaviours like angry outbursts, sleep problems and anxiety can be exacerbated by the death. Talking with the child and normalising their feelings can be helpful but where behaviours persist some more support may be necessary.

Here are some common behaviours that families ask SeeSaw about:

- **Avoidance.** Children avoid talking about what has happened or the person who has died.
- **Separation anxiety.** When children become anxious about leaving their parent or main carer because they are afraid that something else 'bad' is going to happen, or something is going to happen to that adult.
- **Heightened anxiety.** Some children can become overly anxious about a range of different everyday activities and start to worry about everything.
- **Angry outbursts.** Children may become suddenly angry or aggressive in their behaviour towards other adults and siblings. Where there were previous concerns over behaviour before the death it's likely that these behaviours will become more troublesome after the death.

- **Sleep difficulties.** Children's bedtime routines and sleep patterns are often disrupted following a death. This quiet time of the day with little activity to distract is often the time when the child may become tearful and particularly miss the person who has died. This can lead to a range of sleep difficulties.
- **School refusal.** A disruption in school routine following someone's death can, if left unsupported, lead to a child refusing to go to school. This is particularly the case for children who were already struggling with regular school attendance.

★ We also have a list of helpful books that can encourage children to explore what they are experiencing. The booklist offers a range of topics for children of different ages and is available from SeeSaw (see back cover for contact details) or on our website: www.seesaw.org.uk



Remembering

Most children and their families will be able to manage the death of a grandparent and will not need professional help. The key is to talk about what has happened and to remember the person who has died. Sometimes children worry about forgetting so here are some tried and tested practical activities that you could do with your child to help you remember.

Create a memory box:

You will need a box with a lid (it could be a shoe box that your child can cover and decorate). Together gather objects that tell a story about the person who has died and put them in the box.

Here are some ideas of what you might include:

- a scarf or a special brooch or other piece of jewellery
- a special tie or hat
- perfume, soap or aftershave

- photographs of special days out
- favourite music or film
- a toy animal if you liked to go to the zoo or a drawing of the park
- pictures or objects of things they liked doing, e.g. a packet of seeds if they liked gardening or pictures of any hobbies, like a favourite football team, fishing or baking
- pictures your child might have drawn for their grandparent
- cards that have been sent or received for birthdays, Christmas, holiday postcards or sympathy cards
- the order of service from the funeral

The box can include anything that reminds the child of their grandparent. Help your child to be as creative as they want.

A memory jar:

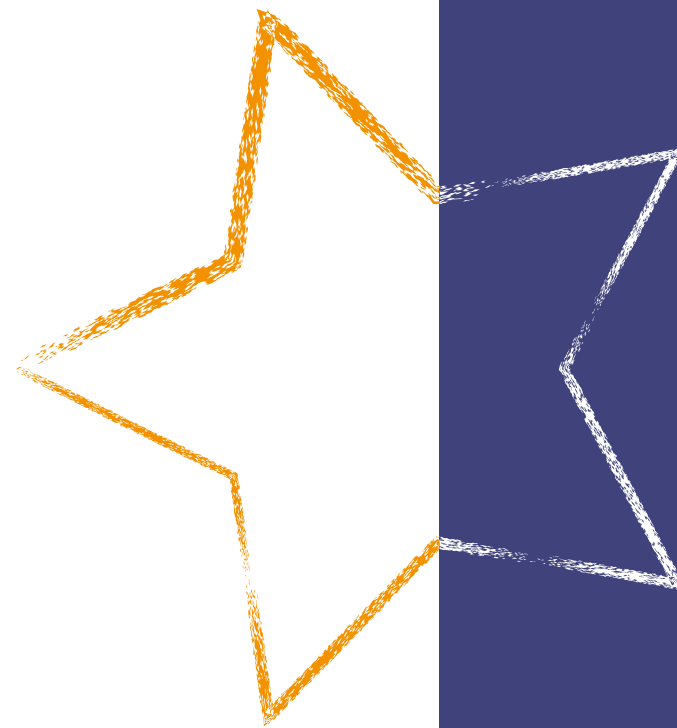
You will need a large jar like a sweet jar, small pieces of paper or card, coloured pens. Every time you or your child remembers something special about their grandparent you can write the memory or draw a picture of that memory and put it in the jar. On difficult days or times when you want to remember you can take out some of the cards and read them together. You can invite anyone who knew the person to add their own memory to the jar.

A photo album:

Sometimes children like their own collection of photographs of their grandparent. Have a few prints taken from mobile phones or cameras and put them in a small photo album that can fit in a school bag or be kept in the child's bedroom.



Notes



Seesaw works closely with children and their families to help them learn to live in a world where someone they love has died.

We provide:

- **telephone consultation** with any parent or professional who is concerned about a bereaved child
- **visits to families** to assess their needs and discuss how SeeSaw might be able to help
- **specially trained support workers** who can meet with the child or young person at home to help them explore the impact the bereavement is having on their lives and find ways of coping
- **specialist support** for families and professionals when a parent or sibling is dying
- **group activities** that enable children and young people and families to meet together in a fun and relaxed way
- **information and training** for school staff who are supporting a bereaved child in the classroom or managing a death in the school community
- **training, consultancy and resources** for professionals who work with bereaved children and young people



Grief support for
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