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When a Grandparent Dies

An evidence-based guide for parents helping children grieve the loss of a grandparent.

Why This Loss Matters More Than People Think

For many children, a grandparent's death is their very first encounter with death. The Childhood Bereavement Network confirms that the death of a grandparent is the most common bereavement in childhood. This means it is not just a loss — it is an introduction to grief itself.

A longitudinal study published in Social Science Research found that grandparental death can have lasting effects on children's cognitive development, particularly for boys ages 5–9, who showed lower reading, verbal, and math scores following the loss.

Grandparents often serve as secondary attachment figures — providing stability, serving as a bridge to family history, and offering unconditional love different from parental love. When that figure dies, the child loses not just a person but a particular kind of safety.

Well-meaning phrases like "they lived a good life" or "it was their time" teach children that some deaths do not deserve full grief — a lesson that distorts their relationship with loss for years.

Source: Social Science Research (PMC) — Children's Cognitive Outcomes Following Grandparental Death.
https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11867193/

Source: Grief Encounter — Supporting a Child Through the Death of a Grandparent.
https://www.griefencounter.org.uk/grief-guide/supporting-a-child-through-the-death-of-a-grandparent/

What to Say — and What to Avoid

Use clear, direct language.

Say "Grandma died" or "Grandpa's body stopped working." Avoid euphemisms like "lost," "resting," "went to sleep," or "in a better place." A child told Grandpa "went to sleep" may become terrified of bedtime.

Be careful with "old" and "very sick."

Saying "she was very old" may make the child anxious about every older adult. Saying "he was very sick" may cause panic at the next cold. Be specific: "Grandpa had a serious illness called cancer. It's not the same as a cold. You cannot catch it."

Answer questions honestly.

It is fine to say "Nobody really knows what happens after we die, but in our family we believe…" What matters is not shutting the questions down.

Do not minimize the death.

"They lived a good life" or "they wouldn't want you to cry" tells children their sadness is unwelcome. Instead: "It is okay to be sad. I am sad too."

Reassure them about safety.

"I am healthy and plan to be here for a very long time. If anything ever happened to me, Aunt Lisa and Uncle Tony would take care of you."

Source: Hospice Foundation of America — Helping Children Cope with Loss. https://hospicefoundation.org/helping-children-cope-with-loss/

How Children Grieve at Different Ages

Toddlers and preschoolers (2–5):

They may not understand permanence. They ask repeatedly when Grandma is coming back. They sense emotional upheaval and respond with clinginess, sleep regression, or tantrums. Provide extra physical comfort and simple, concrete explanations.

School-age children (6–9):

They understand death is permanent but may become intensely anxious: "Will Mom die too?" They need reassurance, consistency, and permission to ask any question.

Preteens (10–12):

They may try to be "strong" for parents. Watch for the child who goes quiet and seems fine — they may be suppressing grief to avoid burdening others.

Adolescents (13–18):

Teens may grieve privately through music, writing, or peers rather than parents. They may feel the loss as losing a mentor, a storyteller, a link to family identity. This grief resurfaces at milestones — graduations, weddings, becoming parents.

Children often grieve in "bursts" rather than continuously. A child who seems fine one hour may dissolve into tears the next. Allow the waves.

Source: Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma (PMC) — Developmental Manifestations of Grief. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8794619/

When a Grandparent Dies in Hospice

When a grandparent is in hospice, there is often time to prepare — and that time is a gift. Research shows children who are prepared for a death fare significantly better than those who are blindsided.

- Tell them early, in age-appropriate terms: "Grandpa is very sick with something the doctors cannot fix."
- Prepare them for physical changes before visits: "Grandma looks different now. She might be sleeping a lot."

- Let them visit if they want to — never force it, but always offer. Many children later express gratitude for the chance.
- Give them a role: drawing a picture, reading a story, holding a hand. These acts give the child agency.

Source: Canadian Virtual Hospice — Preparing Children for Death. https://www.virtualhospice.ca

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Keeping the Connection Alive

Grandparents are often the keepers of family stories, recipes, and traditions. Helping children maintain that connection is both therapeutic and meaningful.

- Tell stories at the dinner table. When children hear stories, they learn the dead are not erased.
- Continue traditions — if Grandpa made pancakes on Sunday, keep making pancakes.
- Create a memory project: scrapbook, memory box, or a letter to the grandparent.
- Include children in funeral or memorial rituals if they choose. Research shows inclusion helps children process grief more effectively.

Source: Grief Encounter — Supporting a Child Through the Death of a Grandparent. https://www.griefencounter.org.uk

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