

Penhaligon's Friends

When a Grandparent Dies



Often, when a grandparent dies, it is a child's first experience of death.

How your child copes with the death will depend on factors such as, their age and understanding of death, how significant the relationship with their grandparent was and how they are helped by the adults around them to make sense of what has happened.

Telling your child that someone has died is never easy and it is natural for adults to want to shelter their child from bad news and the pain of grief. However, you are likely to be grieving for your parent too and even very young children pick up on difficult times.

The death of a family member or friend can have a deep impact on children. Children experience grief just as adults do. Even before children are able to talk they are aware of grief to some extent and the feelings children have about the death become a part of their lives forever.

Your child will be looking to you and following your lead. They will learn from you how to react and respond.

It is important to be honest with your child. You can be honest in a way that doesn't overwhelm them with lots of information at once. Your honest approach can help them manage the road that is ahead of them in a healthy way. Being honest when you answer your child's questions will help them understand that they can trust you and it can mean that your child is more likely to talk to you about their worries and feelings. Not just now but in the future too.

It is important to remember that children deal with death differently. A young child at two or three years of age will have a much limited understanding of death and an older child of eight or nine will probably be able to understand that death is permanent and they will remember the experience clearly.

A child's understanding will depend on their individual emotional development and in any case, the way an adult explains to a child about death, or matters relating to death, should be pitched at the level they are able to understand.

A child having an emotionally available adult who is willing to talk openly about the death of a loved one is likely to cope better than a child who tries to work things out and manage difficult feelings on their own. What children don't know – they make up! Many adults talk about difficult things within earshot of their child and, whilst the child may not appear to be listening, they are! Leaving the child with only bits and bobs of information that doesn't really make sense to them and it is often this exact scenario that causes unnecessary confusion and anxieties for a child.

Children need the help of an adult to know what has happened and to understand that grieving for someone when they have died is natural. A child needs the adults around them to show them that it's all right to be sad and to cry; that the strength of the hurt they feel now won't last forever.

Tell your child that the person has died. Explain that when someone dies it means that all of their body, from their head to their toes does not work anymore - Children commonly think the head is not part of the body!

Let them know that the person can't feel anything, they can't see or hear anything and they don't eat, drink or move anymore. Be clear that this is different from sleeping and how we are alive when we sleep. Our sleep is important to help us rest our body.

Explain that something very serious must happen to stop a person's body from working. That our bodies are very good at getting better when we are poorly and at mending themselves when we have an accident. Sometimes the doctor might need to help someone get better but sometimes they can't and the person dies.

Your child will need to know that most people live a long, long time and until they are really old. They need to know that someone will always look after them.

Use words that the child can understand. Avoid euphemisms – saying things such as 'sleeping' or 'gone away' can confuse a child more.

Saying 'they have gone to a better place' can also leave a child confused and wondering why they chose to go without them. They may also want to 'die' to go to the better place!

Tell your child that you are all sad and miss nanny/grandad and encourage them to remember all the memories they have of them. You can explain to your child why you might be behaving differently and let them know that you are grieving.

The death of a distant grandparent may have a very short impact on your child and they may move on very quickly.

When a child first experiences death it can be normal for them to become more anxious for a while. They may also worry about you too. Reassure your child that they are safe and cared for. Reassure them that you are ok and it is normal for you to be upset at the moment.

It may seem easier to keep your child at home with you when they protest about leaving you and going to school etc. It is important you show your child that the world is generally still safe for them and remind them that they are safe at school – of course they would prefer to stay with you! However, allowing them to easily retreat from doing things can give your child the wrong message. Speak to your child's teacher if you have concerns.

It is common for children to regress in behaviours and you may see, for some time, that they are needier of reassurance and your attention. This can be really tiring for parents who are grieving too. Try to keep routine and boundaries the same as they always have been as much as possible. This will feel safe and predictable for your child when things are feeling more frightening.

Try to comfort your child with their feelings rather than trying to fix them or make them go away.

Your child may need to discuss what has happened again and again over time. As they get older it is normal for them to go through different emotions and want to know more. They will be changing developmentally and their understanding of the world will be changing too – their grief and what has happened is now part of their life story and, whilst you can't take away what has happened, you can help them cope with it in a healthy way.

Involve your child in the funeral process by giving them simple explanations about what to expect – even if they are too young to remember it they may appreciate knowing they were a part of it when they are older.

Remember! Grieving children are still children and like all children may push the boundaries or even use the death or how they feel to behave in a way they shouldn't or wouldn't have done before.

You can acknowledge how your child feels without having to accept inappropriate behaviour. Let them know it is ok to feel the way they do and empathise with them but be clear with them that it is not ok to behave that way. Show them different, more positive, ways of managing their feelings.

Find ways to remember their grandparent, perhaps make a memory box or story book. This could be something you can share with your child as they grow older and you can look at it together at times.

Seek support if you are concerned about your child from your GP, School or Penhaligon's Friends.

Ensure that your child's school is aware of what has happened. Let them know that they can contact Penhaligon's Friends for advice on how best to support your child in school if they feel that would be helpful.

Seek support for yourself too – children can cope much better if they see their parent/carer taking care of themselves and their grief.