

A RESOURCE
FROM
NACG
MEMBERS



Grandparents Raising Grandchildren TOOLKIT



General Introduction to Grandparent Grief

The death of a child is contrary to what most of us expect in life. We typically expect to outlive our children and for them to be alive through our grandchildren's youth. These expectations cause many to view grandparents as the "out of natural order grievers". Many people typically focus on the deceased's partner and/or children as being the most impacted by the death. Just as children and teens have unique considerations while grieving, so do grandparents as they may be taking on new responsibilities while also managing their own physical and health limitations.

***Inclusive Gender Statement:** In the context of this document, the use of the term "child(ren)" encompasses both boys and girls, as well as any other gender identity or gender expression that falls within the spectrum of childhood. This language choice is intended to promote inclusion and respect for the diversity of gender identities and non-binary genders.

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Telling a Child Someone Has Died

Introduction

Telling a child someone close to them has died is never easy, but as caregivers, we may face having these conversations with a young person. While deeply challenging, how we approach this moment can have a lasting impact on the child's life and on your relationship with the child.

Before the Conversation

Resist the urge to protect the child from the pain of the death by avoiding the conversation. Children deserve honesty, especially with difficult conversations, and honesty is critical to sustaining trust as the child grows. Children must learn the news of a death in an intentional and direct conversation with a trusted parent or adult.



Plan for the location, timing, and setting of the conversation.

Think about what space the child feels most comfortable in, such as a favorite room or space in the home.

Create emotional safety for you and the child. If you can, allow yourself time to think through what you will say before you deliver the news. Emotional reactions to painful news are natural, but it is important for you and the child to feel safe in the moment. The child may take their cue from you about how to react to the situation. It is important to take care of yourself before the conversation to ensure emotional safety. Deep breathing, relaxation, and meditation exercises are helpful ways to practice self-care before the conversation.

Consider the child's age and development. Every child is different. Age and experience play a role in how they will react to the news that someone has died. [Click here to learn more about developmental understandings related to grief and children by age group.](#)

In preparation, gather:

- Items such as blankets or stuffed animals that help the child feel secure and comforted.
- Playdough, art supplies, or toys can occupy their hands to help them cope during the conversation and allow the child to express their feelings after the conversation.
- Children's books about death, dying, grief, and loss can be used to help you support in continuing the conversation afterwards.

Having the Conversation

Having the conversation may be the most difficult step in telling a child someone close to them has died. As a caregiver, it is important to be mindful of any emotions you are feeling as children are perceptive of non-verbal messages from adults and may observe them during the conversation.

As you are speaking with the child:

- Take your time. Pauses can help reflect on a child's response and your emotions.
- Use direct language such as death, died, etc. and provide simple and brief explanations and simple examples for the child to understand.
- Review the child's understanding of death.
- Answer any question the child may ask and say, "I don't know" to the questions you do not know how to answer.

It is important to normalize the child's feelings. Explain to them it's okay to feel sad, scared, confused, glad, angry, etc. You can offer support by sharing how you are feeling. Share your feelings with the child and a way of coping. It gives a child permission to express their feelings and help them understand feelings will come and go.

Educate the child about family rituals after the death. Share any beliefs or traditions that are part of the child's family or culture.

Identify support. In addition to parents or caregivers, it may be helpful to help the child identify other adults to provide support.

Help say goodbye. Another important piece of the conversation is educating the child on the importance of saying goodbye. Give them some examples, such as writing a letter or drawing a picture.



It's okay to show your emotions during the conversation.



After the Conversation

Remember, every child reacts differently. Some kids cry, some ask questions, and others seem to not react at all. Each response is okay. Stay with the child to offer reassurance and be open to answering questions.

Children may have a number of emotions, including but not limited to shock, fear, anger, guilt, or even relief. These feelings are normal. You may find some children don't seem to show these at all. Try to reassure them it's okay to have different feelings. They may experience grief through behavioral shifts, including trouble sleeping or finding it hard to concentrate. Children may be clingier and need more attention. They might begin to worry about losing someone else in their life. Reassure the child they are loved and will always be cared for. It may help to rely on family members.

Things to Consider

Children as young as two will assume the care of an adult who is grieving. They do not want to cause hurt to important people in their life, so their emotions are often hidden. Maintaining as much routine as possible, even a simple meal and bedtime rituals, will help children of any age be aware of their support people, feel secure, and believe there is hope. Other routine activities include taking family walks, going on bike rides, or just playing outside.





Things to Remember When Talking to Children & Teens About Death & Dying

10 Key Points to remember when talking to children and teens about death and dying

Grief is individual. Children and teens usually do not tell you they are grieving by what they say and do. No two people grieve the exact same way, but there are reactions to help you know a child or teen is grieving.



Use simple, clear age-appropriate language. Caregivers should explain the death in a compassionate manner using age-appropriate short, simple explanations in language children and teens can understand. It is important to use the right words to talk about the death, such as “Mom died from cancer”. Avoid euphemisms like passed away or went to sleep, as they can confuse children and teens. This is key so children and teens do not associate the death with anything other than the reality of how it occurred.

Children and teens want to be told the truth about the death. It can be difficult to explain a stigmatized death to a child or teen, for example, death by suicide or a drug-related death. Our instinct is to protect the children and teens from heartbreaking situations. Although it might be more comfortable for us to avoid these conversations, they are very important for the child or teen’s understanding.

Be honest. Honesty is the foundation of a trusting relationship between a caregiver and child or teens. Lying to a child or teen about the circumstances of death could lead to bitterness and mistrust when they learn the truth. Let their questions guide what you share. Speak openly and honestly about the death. It is ok not to know all the answers.

Take time to prepare for difficult conversations. Take some deep breaths and give yourself time to collect your thoughts. Think of this initial conversation as laying the groundwork, allowing the child or teen to ask questions and explore what they are thinking. It is not the time to share all available information. Focus on ensuring they understand what was said and explain the death was no one’s fault.

Accept this is an ongoing conversation. Younger children might need to be told many times and they might ask over and over again how the person died.

Listen. When a child or teen is grieving, people can be quick to offer advice, give opinions and make judgments. What is most helpful is to listen without judging, interpreting, or evaluating.

Model healthy grieving. Children and teens look to their caregivers as a role model for how people grieve. Share your feelings with them as long as they are relieved of the task of trying to “fix it”.

Allow and validate emotional expression. It is important for children and teens who are grieving to have the space to be able to express their grief and have it validated. Validation of grief reactions occurs when adults or peers in a child’s life acknowledge what the child or teen is feeling and allow the child the space needed to express their grief in a way that feels most natural to them, as long as they are not hurting themselves or others.

Grief is long-lasting. Grief is not an experience children or teens “get over” or “move on” from after a few weeks or months. Grief does not have a timeline and it changes over the course of someone’s life. It is OK for children and teens to continue to grieve the loss as they grow and develop.

When to Seek Additional Support

After a death, it is essential to monitor changes in frequency, intensity, and duration of family members’ behaviors. Noticeable changes may require additional support from an experienced, trained professional. Below are some examples of changes to look for:

- Inability to go to work or school
- Difficulties in relationships
- Sleep problems or nightmares
- Disproportionate anger or irritability
- Increased health issues
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Social withdrawal
- Self-harm, suicidal thoughts, or suicidal ideation

Sometimes family members may want to connect with others for additional support. Connecting family members with peer support groups, camps, conferences, or another person with a similar loss can help provide an added layer of support. These outside connections provide the griever with an opportunity to learn new perspectives on grief, coping, and healing.

Connecting with others allows people who are grieving the opportunity to share their stories, understand they are not alone, and validate and normalize their experience. It is important to embrace a family members’ readiness, as well as the type of support needed. Needs may vary among family members throughout their grief journey.

You can find additional grief support in your area by visiting www.nacg.org/find-support.



Navigating New Roles

Navigating New Roles

You are not alone! There are many grandparents and other relatives raising grandchildren. Raising children brings with it common challenges, from meeting basic needs to making sure homework gets done. Grandparents in this role may need to seek out resources for managing their own physical and emotional health and to support them in navigating these new roles. There is help and support available to you.

Technology

- Engage in training provided by the school district regarding student portals.
- Check with your local municipality and libraries for free trainings.
- Goodwill Community Foundation, Inc. provides free tutorials for many areas of technology, including computer programs, social media, and online safety. Learn more at: [GCFLearnFree.org](https://www.gcflearnfree.org)



Financial

- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for income eligible families. Find your state's program information at: www.fns.usda.gov/snap/state-directory
- Medicaid/Medicare, CHIP (Children's Health Insurance Program) - Find your state's program information at: www.insurekidsnow.gov/coverage/index.html
- TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) - Find your state's contact at: www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/map/about/help-families
- Social Security Survivor/Disability Benefits may be available when a biological parent is deceased and/or if a child has a medical or mental health disability. Find your eligibility at: benefits-tool-beta.usa.gov/death-of-a-loved-one/?
- United Way helps with filing taxes for free. Find your local United Way at: www.unit-edway.org/find-your-united-way/
- Free school lunch - Learn more at: www.fns.usda.gov/nsfp/household
- Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides nutritional supports including healthy foods for families with children under age 5. Find your state's program information at: fns.usda.gov/contacts/contact-map?f%5B0%5D=program%3A32

Isolation

- Search for national/regional/local Facebook groups to connect grandparents. An example of a group to join would be: www.facebook.com/groups/387672129352684
- Connect with your local bereavement center

Health

- Keep regular medical and preventive care appointments for yourself and the child.
- Maintain regular exercise and healthy diet.

Parenting

- Positive and supportive statements will help establish an environment of caring for you and the child.
- Use clear language and an even tone. Young people who are grieving often have big emotional responses. Try to be a steady presence when this happens.
- It is important to set limits and define expectations. It is also helpful to be clear about consequences.
- Ask the child for input and give choices when possible; designate a personal space in your home belonging to the child. Let the child have input in their room.

Court and Legal Services

- Reach out to your local municipality's Probate Court.
- Contact Legal Aid to ensure you know about benefits you are entitled to. This site has general and legal-specific resources categorized by state: www.grandfamilies.org/resources
- Some family courts offer a "lawyer of the day program" to help grandparents with guardianship and questions.
- Resist the urge to say negative things about a family member in front of a child or teen. This can leave them with feelings of confusion. Share your feelings with other trusted adults in private or in therapy.
- Set boundaries and expectations with other family members. Make it clear when they are allowed visits and interactions with children. Remember, children thrive on routine and consistency.
- Make sure to update your will, with help from Legal Aid if needed

Support Services

- Support Groups – find your local bereavement center and see if support groups are available. To find support: www.nacg.org/find-support
- Grandfamilies.org State Fact Sheets with State Specific Resources. Find your state at: www.grandfamilies.org/State-Fact-Sheets
- Reach out to the child's school to connect with the school counselor and other support faculty to see what support services may be available to the child.
- Reach out to the child's pediatrician and social groups involved in the child's life, such as a church or activity group.
- Special Education Services – If your grandchild is struggling at school, they may qualify for special education services. You may request that the school complete an evaluation to determine if the child is eligible. For more information, reach out to the Federation for Children with Special needs at: www.fcsn.org



Self-Care

Balancing Your New Roles

As you transition to the role of raising grandchildren, know you are not alone. This is a time of many changes, which may bring some uncertainty, but also positive changes.

Allow yourself to grieve your losses:

- The person who died
- The role of “just a grandparent”
- Empty nest
- Friends who don’t want to be around kids
- Travel
- Freedom/Independence
- Financial independence
- Changes in your retirement plan

Acknowledge and allow space and time for yourself. It is important to take care of yourself and have a plan of how to do so.

Self-Care Action Plan

1. Think about your values. What is important to you in your life?
2. Identify signs you might be experiencing exhaustion.
3. Identify the things you currently need for your wellbeing?
4. Identify the self-care activities you are currently doing.
5. Reflect on your answers to #1-4 and identify additional self-care activities you could benefit from.
6. Set some simple goals for your self-care and create your self-care action plan.

Types of Self-Care and Examples

Emotional	Mental	Physical	Social	Spiritual
Attend a therapy session	Read	Taking a prescribed medication	Coffee or lunch with a friend	Meditation
Aromatherapy	Take some quiet time	Going for a walk	Have a date night	Mindfulness sessions
Journaling	Enjoy nature	Get enough sleep or take a nap	Find a support group	Attend a faith-based service
Receive or give a hug	Have a good laugh	Eating healthy	Cuddle with a furry friend	Listen to or play music
Practice daily gratitude	Sing or dance	Have a good cry	Connect with family through tradition	Positive affirmations

My Self-Care Action Plan

My self-care goal(s):

Warning signs I need extra self-care:

Mental self-care...

Emotional self-care...

Physical self-care...

Social self-care...

Spiritual self-care...

Reminder:
I must make time for myself if I want to make time for others.



Additional Resources

Additional Resources

The inclusion of any organization or resource in this Resource List does not imply or constitute an endorsement or recommendation, nor does exclusion imply disapproval.

Department of Aging

State-by-State resource with regional offices

Website: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/states-territories-tribes/>

American Association of Retired Persons (AARP)

The Home and Family resource page on the AARP website offers ideas, articles and discussion groups for a variety of family and grandparenting issues.

Toll-free nationwide: 888-OUR-AARP or 888-687-2277

Website: www.aarp.org/home-family/friends-family/

AARP Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: Grandfamilies Guide

A guide for grandparents raising grandchildren with tips, tools and resources.

Website: www.aarp.org/relationships/friends-family/info-08-2011/grandfamilies-guide-getting-started.html

BH Technology Group

Offers group classes and private lessons for seniors in all areas of technology.

Website: bhtechgroup.org/lessons

Big Brothers Big Sisters

Nationwide volunteer-supported mentor program

Website: www.bbbs.org

Brookdale Foundation Group

Relatives as Parents Program

Website: www.brookdalefoundation.org

Child Welfare League of America

Phone: (202) 688-4200

Website: www.cwla.org

Generations United – National Center on Grandfamilies

Website: www.gu.org/explore-our-topics/grandfamilies

GRANDcares

Website: www.grandcares.colostate.edu/for-service-providers

Grandfamilies.org

A national legal resource in support of grandfamilies.

Website: www.grandfamilies.org

Grandparents Raising Grandkids

Website: www.pahouse.com/files/Documents/2018-01-25_030722__121%20Grands%20Raising%20Grandkids.pdf

Grandparent's Role With Grandchildren

Website: www.extramile.thehartford.com/family/grandparenting/grandparenting-role

HelpGuide on Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

A guide on navigating the varied challenges of raising grandchildren.

Website: www.helpguide.org/articles/parenting-family/grandparents-raising-grandchildren.htm

Love and Logic

Parenting Classes and free resources on developmental age.

Website: www.loveandlogic.com/pages/articles-and-advice-for-parents

National Community Reinvestment Coalition

Resources for Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

Website: www.ncrc.org/resources-for-grandparents-raising-grandchildren

National Alliance for Children's Grief Find Support

Search by zip code or state to find children's grief support near you.

Website: www.nacg.org/find-support

National Alliance for Children's Grief Resource Library

A library of resources to use as a tool to support a child who is grieving.

Website: www.nacg.org/resources

PA Parent and Family Alliance

Website: www.paparentandfamilyalliance.org

Zero to Three – The Grand Connector: Grandparent Resources

A resource listing with specific resources for grandparents as caregivers.

Website: <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/for-families/grandparents/>



NATIONAL ALLIANCE FOR
CHILDREN'S GRIEF

nacg.org