SUPPORTING A CHILD THROUGH THE DEATH OF A GRANDPARENT

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MANAGING THE NEWS

The death of a grandparent is often a child’s first experience of death and means that they are not only managing the loss of that person but also the confusing and sometimes scary questions about death itself. Children can move quickly between needing comfort and cuddles to asking challenging and forthright questions. For parents and others supporting the child this can be difficult to manage, particularly if you are grieving yourself, but an honest and open approach will help them to process their anxiety and understand their feelings. Below is some advice around talking to children when a grandparent has died but grief is individual, families have different belief systems and relationships with grandparents vary, so it is also important to remember that you know your child best and to trust your instincts.

GUIDANCE

* Explain what has happened using clear and simple language. Words such as ‘lost’, ‘resting’, ‘gone to sleep’ and ‘in a better place’ can lead to feelings of abandonment and sleep problems.
* Be cautious about explaining death in terms of being ‘old’ or ‘very ill’, keeping in mind that your child may have different conceptions of this and worry about others they consider ill or old.
* Let them know what will happen now, such as a funeral, and how your family will commemorate their grandparent.
* Talk about how they might be a part of the rituals. If a child is going to attend a service prepare them that some may be crying but others may be chatting and laughing and that this is how people share memories.
* It is natural to not want children to be upset but minimising the death by saying things like ‘they lived a good life’ or ‘they wouldn’t want you to cry’ can make them feel like they are not allowed to be sad.
* Let them know that you or other people might be upset, sad or even seem angry but this is not about anything they have done.
* Allow children to ask questions, but don’t feel like you need to have all the answers. It is fine to say to a child that ‘nobody really knows what happens after we die’ possibly adding ‘but in our family/religion we believe ….’
* Expect different responses, sometimes children may take the news in their stride or not appear that upset. An emotional response can be delayed.
* Younger children may need some help to understand the permanence of death and that the person will not be coming back.

PROCESSING THE GRIEF

Grief is a continuous process and it can be helpful to find ways to help your child process the loss over time. Children will naturally want to get back to their normal routines and the things they enjoy but this does not mean that they want to forget entirely. It can be helpful to set aside a time when you can talk or do remembrance activities together so that their feelings have a time to be heard but it does not come to dominate their everyday lives.

GUIDANCE

* Talk about the person, this will help model that it is ok to talk about them and will not make people more upset.
* Share your memories to help them have a sense of shared loss.
* Do not worry if they want to carry around a picture or wear something belonging to their grandparent. If appropriate you could make a scrapbook of photos, memories and ‘facts’ about their grandparent. This can be an opportunity for them to discover things they didn’t know and create something to keep for the future.
* Find an opportunity to talk about the person ahead of any occasion that they would have been at, such as family parties. Even though they may know they will not be there it can still be a ‘shock’ for a child when they feel their absence.

The Grief Encounter helpline, grieftalk can be contacted from 9am – 9pm Monday to Friday. The grieftalk helpline number is 0808 802 0111, or you can chat online or even email us now, we are here to listen.