

Helping Children and Youth Grieving a Grandparent Death

For a child or teen, when a grandparent dies it is not only a loss of a family member, but also often their first experience with death. This can create fears for the child or teen regarding their own safety and that of their parents and siblings.

If you have concerns for a child or teen who is grieving a grandparent death and feel it would be helpful to talk through ways to provide support, Lighthouse offers telephone consultations: 905-337-2333

Loving parents and caregivers often want to prevent or take away the pain that their child or teen is feeling after the death of a grandparent. While it's not possible to prevent their grief, there are some things that adults can do to help children and teens understand and cope with their grief.

- Children and teens need truthful information in order to understand and accept a death. Answer their questions about death in clear, simple, age-appropriate language. When we avoid talking to a child or teen about the death, it can feel more ominous and their imagination may create scarier thoughts and images than the truth.
- Avoid using euphemisms for death, such as rest or sleep or referring to the death as a loss. A child may become confused and think that the grandparent should wake up or that they are lost and will return.
- Help the child or teen to understand an elderly person's death in the context of the life cycle. Using examples from nature such as caterpillars transforming to a new life as a butterfly, or the interdependence of plants and animals in the eco-cycle, can help them understand.
- Explain the death in relation to the family's spiritual beliefs. Don't feel you must have all the answers to questions about death and afterlife. Often, by posing the question back to the child or teen it allows them an opportunity to express their fears or wishes for their grandparent. Exploring the question gives them the chance to sort through their own thoughts and beliefs about a possible afterlife.
- Understand that every child or teen grieves differently. While some are comfortable to talk and have many questions, others have difficulty finding words to express their grief. Some children/teens find comfort through tears, while others will be sullen or angry, and feel that what has happened is unfair. Allow the child or teen permission to have and to share their own feelings, and to let them know that you are available to support them.
- Gather a few belongings of the grandparent for the child or teen to keep. This may include photos, an article of clothing, or small keepsakes. Where possible, it is helpful for the child or teen to choose the items themselves: the meaning that objects hold is different and personal for each person. Such objects can often help them feel an ongoing connection to their grandparent.
- Point out positive traits the child or teen may have inherited from their grandparent (eye or hair colour, their laugh, talents, common interests, etc). This realization can help a child or teen to feel a sense of pride as well as a continued relationship and connection to their grandparent.
- Allow yourself to express your own grief thoughts and emotions in front of the child or teen so that they can see this is normal. When adults hide their grief (often to protect the child or teen from pain), they set an example that the child or teen should not be having or expressing difficult feelings. By showing and talking about grief, a parent/guardian lets the child or teen know that it's okay and normal for them to do so as well.
- Keep talking and reminiscing about the person who died. Children/teens tend to fear that they will forget their grandparent. By continuing to share fond memories, the child or teen will know that it is not taboo to talk about their grandparent, and helps keep the memory of the grandparent alive in their mind and heart. Asking other elders and members of the family to share additional stories about the grandparent can help add a fuller understanding of their family history.