Your Relationships

Helping Grandchildren Deal with Grief

Grandparents often become a family’s first reserves in times of crisis. During these times, grands may act as playmates for children, role models, family historians, and mentors. Their role is to help establish self-esteem and security for children.

We all want what’s best for our grandchildren. We want to keep them safe. We want to protect them from pain and sadness. We’d like them to stay as innocent as they were on the day they were born. Unfortunately, we can’t keep bad things from happening to those we love. Before they reach adulthood, many children will experience a major loss that will cause them intense pain. In fact, some children experience multiple losses before their childhood is over. Their parents may divorce. A parent, sibling or other loved one may die after a long illness or an accident. These events can turn a child’s world upside down. Children may also experience the death of a playmate or classmate or the death of a family pet. Some grandchildren grieve because a parent is in jail, addicted to drugs, or abusive. These children often feel abandoned. They go through a grieving process similar to that experienced by children whose parents have died.

Normal Reactions – and Causes for Worry

Children often have trouble accepting that a death has occurred or that a parent has abandoned them. They don’t quite know what to do about the pain they feel. They miss the person who is gone. They worry about who will take care of them. And they do all of this with the immature emotions of a child. Children who are grieving need plenty of help from all the adults in their lives, including their grandparents.

For a certain period of time, it’s normal for a grieving grandchild to:
• Feel depressed or anxious.
• Act out or become angry.
• Act younger than they are by wetting the bed or sucking their thumb (if they didn’t before).
• Blame themselves for a death or the fact that a parent can’t take care of them.
• Play make-believe games about death and dying.
• Ask the same questions over and over because the information is so hard for them to believe or accept.

There is no timetable for grieving. Behaviors should improve as the child moves through the grieving process. If the behavior persists, consider seeking outside help. Getting this help is particularly important if the child:
• Talks about “joining” the person who has died.
• Has a dramatic decline in school performance.
• Becomes involved with drugs or alcohol.
• Won’t or can’t connect with others.
• Has nightmares or trouble sleeping for an extended period.

The Way Children Mourn

Children grieve differently than adults do. First, children don’t show grief all the time. Many children will seem upset only sometimes—and for short periods of time. Don’t let this fool you. It doesn’t mean that a child has “gotten over” his or her grief. It just means that the child can’t focus on these intense emotions for very long. This is the mind’s way of protecting the child from being overwhelmed by strong emotions.

Don’t be surprised if a child takes longer to finish grieving than you do. Children may need to mourn over and over again. They might return to their grief each time they enter a new stage of their lives.

How children respond to loss will depend on their age and maturity. An infant won’t understand the concept of death. But he or she will sense—and be upset by—the emotional tension that the family is experiencing. A preschooler may understand something about death. But he may see death as a kind of sleep. This child may believe that the deceased person is coming back.

As children get older, they begin to understand the possibility of their own deaths. Beginning at age 6 or so, they become afraid of dying. As they get older, they begin to see death as something that is final and something that happens to everyone.

Teenagers often have a very hard time with grief. They may look like adults, but they are still children at heart. Don’t expect them to be strong or to support other family members during this time. Instead, try to give them as much support as possible. If you can’t provide that support, see if you can get the teen to talk with a school counselor, therapist or another caring adult.
What Can You Do to Help?

Grandparents are in a good position to “be there” for a grandchild who has lost a loved one. If other members of the family are caught up in grief, they may not notice what the child is going through. As a grandparent, you can focus on the child and make sure he or she gets needed support.

Here are some tips for helping a grieving grandchild:

• Talk about what has happened. Be calm and quiet. Tell the truth and keep it simple. Answer questions honestly. Make sure the child understands your answer.

• Be patient. Children often need to have things repeated. You may have to answer the same question more than once.

• Share your own feelings about the loss. Ask the child to share feelings too. You may have to help the child put feelings into words. Drawing pictures and playing with dolls may help.

• Help the child remember the person who is gone. If a loved one has died, involve the child in the funeral, if he or she wants to be involved. But be sure to prepare the child for what will happen during the ceremony. If a parent is in jail, help the child write letters or take the child to visit the prison. If a parent has abandoned the child, make sure the child knows this isn’t the child’s fault.

You can’t protect your grandchildren from sadness. But you can help them mourn and move on. Your support will let your grandchildren know that they are not alone. Your understanding will help your grandchildren understand and cope with the terrible thing that has happened to them. And your love will reassure your grandchildren that there will always be someone who cares about them and wants to take care of them.

Source: AARP

Your Health

You May Need More Vitamin D

A recent article in the British Medical Journal reported that about one-third of people over the age of 65 fall each year and one factor is muscle weakness. Muscle weakness is more common in housebound elderly who do not get much exposure to the sun and exercise very little.

A deficiency in Vitamin D is common in seniors because their skin is less able to synthesize Vitamin D from the sun. This can lead not only to bone loss, but also poor muscle strength.

In one study, older women were given 800 International Units (I.U.) of Vitamin D with calcium. These women had 47% fewer falls than those women who only got calcium supplements without Vitamin D. In another similar study, the incidence of falls was halved and muscle function improved when 800 I.U. of Vitamin D was taken. In fact, a total of 5 randomized clinical trials have shown that 800 I.U. of Vitamin D along with calcium significantly reduces falls and broken bones.
Unfortunately studies that only gave 400 I.U. of Vitamin D were ineffective in reducing fractures. The current amount of Vitamin D recommended by the federal government is 600 I.U. Fortunately 800 I.U. is still much less than the upper safe limit for intake of Vitamin D. It can be gotten with a multivitamin and 3 cups of Vitamin D fortified milk or with a Vitamin D supplement alone.

The author of this study in the *British Medical Journal* predicts that if Vitamin D were given for one year to only those women who were deficient, one fall in every five women could be prevented. If Vitamin D were given for a year to every 20-25 women confined to a nursing home, without screening for a deficiency, one fracture would be prevented.

This is good news for those of us over the age of 50. No one wants to fall or suffer a fracture. If Vitamin D and calcium can make a difference, consuming these two nutrients is certainly a cost effective way to preserve muscle strength and prevent broken bones.

**Peachy Orange Blossom**

Here is a cool, summer drink that will add Vitamin D and calcium to your diet. It is a good choice for breakfast or a snack when the hot weather dampens your appetite.

1 cup low-fat or fat-free milk  
1 cup sugar-free, low-fat peach yogurt  
½ cup mandarin oranges, drained  
¼ cup calcium-fortified orange juice

Blend all ingredients in blender until smooth. Serve cold.

Makes 2 ½ cups - 2 servings

Adapted from a recipe provided by the Dairy Farmers of Canada.

**Nutrient Analysis with low-fat milk:**
- Calories: 135
- Protein: 9 grams
- Carbohydrate: 22 grams
- Fat: 1.3 grams
- Sodium: 138 milligrams
- Calcium: 351 milligrams
- Vitamin D: 49 I.U.

**Nutrient Analysis with non-fat milk:**
- Calories: 125
- Protein: 9 grams
- Carbohydrate: 22 grams
- Fat: 0 grams
- Sodium: 138 milligrams
- Calcium: 351 milligrams
- Vitamin D: 49 I.U.

**Your Resources**

**Integrated Pest Management in the Home Environment**

Attention seniors! Spring and summer may herald the arrival of unwanted pests in the home environment. Common pests include:

- Ants
- Fleas
- Flies
• Mosquitoes
• Cockroaches

What is the best way to deal with pests in the home environment? Integrated Pest Management (IPM). Integrated Pest Management includes a) maintenance of the home environment rendering it inhospitable to pests, and b) conservative and proper use of pesticides.

Use the following IPM tips to help keep unwanted pests from entering your home environment.

• Keep your home clean.
  Do not leave dishes out over night. Clean up food spills and crumbs. Vacuum floors and furniture often.
• Control moisture in the indoor environment.
  Many pests, such as roaches, come into the indoor environment in search of water. Other pests, such as drain flies, lay eggs in small amounts of water in the house.
• Keep your home free of clutter; pests may make their home in piles of papers or stacks of newspapers.
• Take garbage out frequently, and store it outdoors in a tightly sealed container. Garbage attracts pests.
• Store food properly. Pests such as roaches and ants come inside looking for food.
• Keep your outdoor environment free of standing water and debris.
• Find the source of the pest and eliminate it. Look for pest entry points, such as holes in screens. Also, look for natural bridges to the home, such as wires that connect to or branches that hang over the home. Pests such as ants may use natural bridges to access the home.
• If all else fails, use pesticides appropriately. Use pesticides intended for indoor use indoors, and use pesticides intended for outdoor use outdoors. Read all labels and follow all instructions. Handle the pesticide carefully. Store the pesticide in areas that are inaccessible to children. Never spray areas where food may come into contact with pesticides.
• Remove natural bridges to the home.
• Find the source of the pest and remove it.

Got pest problems that are larger than you can handle? Contact your local Extension office for advice and access to our Residential Pests and Pesticides circulars.

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Dear Friend:

SENIOR SENSE is a quarterly publication provided by your local county Extension Service office. It is prepared by Extension Family & Consumer Sciences specialists at The University of Georgia specifically for the educational needs of older Georgians.

Please contact your local Extension Service office for more information on these and related topics.

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