

Raising Grieving Grandchildren

Death can stir up complex grief reactions for grandparents. Some grandparents are tasked with suddenly shifting to parenting a grieving child as a result. This unexpected shift in roles can further complicate the grief process.

Grandparenting as a life stage

Many parents look forward to the moment their children begin having kids of their own. Grandparenting is a part of life met with joy and often described as experiencing the fun parts of parenthood without the added stress. Grandparents are typically able to spoil their grandchildren and give them all the love and attention they desire. In the middle of retirement or enjoying an empty nest, a death may mean grandparents suddenly face a new reality - raising their grandchildren.

Disrupted timeline

The death of a child is entirely unexpected. A life is planned sequentially, with the belief that a parent will die before their child. After this type of death, a grandparent is faced with grieving their own child. This can bring up initial feelings of shock, denial, disbelief, and numbness. The pain of grief can result in intense loneliness, guilt, sadness, and anger. While parenting again can bring stress and overwhelm, it is imperative you seek your own grief support. Seeking help and processing your feelings, shows your grandchildren that talking about their grief is an important step toward healing.

Raising your grandchildren

For your grandchild, the death of their parent was likely also unexpected. The world may no longer feel safe and predictable. For children, this can cause an increase in unhealthy behaviors and testing of limits. It is important to provide warmth and love to your grandchild while also maintaining consistency with discipline and establishing age-appropriate rules, routines, and schedules. Encourage open and honest communication, allowing grandchildren to come to you when they are struggling.

Take care of yourself

- **Put your oxygen mask on first:** Caregivers of grieving children tend to be focused on taking care of everyone else before themselves. By caring for yourself and making space for your grief, you are better able to create a more loving, nurturing environment for your grandchildren.

- **Acknowledge your feelings:** There can be a tendency to hide feelings from others, especially the difficult ones. It is important to make space for all feelings in your grief. By naming your own feelings and sharing them aloud, you are giving grandchildren permission to connect with you in their grief.
- **Utilize your support network:** Ask for help! Let family, friends, neighbors, and professionals know when you are struggling. Consider joining a support group for grandparents raising grandchildren. Meeting others in a similar situation can provide validation and a sense of community.
- **Connect with younger parents:** Parenting guidance and tools used when raising your own kids may be less relevant now. Finding younger parents to connect with may provide useful tips and education on how to raise children in the current era.