



grandparent to grandparent

A booklet by and for grandparents whose young grandchild
has died suddenly and unexpectedly.

sids^{and} kids[®]

Foreword

This booklet is an acknowledgement that grandparents experience deep sadness when a child dies. We hope that in reading it you may find support in the words of other grandparents.

The words contained here are intended to be an acknowledgement that you are not alone. We hope it helps you to understand your own needs and to give support to your grieving children.

No two experiences are the same. The death of a grandchild is a unique pain and everybody's situation and feelings are different. When your grandchild has died words are empty. It is lonely, isolating, confusing and traumatic. But it is our hope that you find some comfort in the thoughts and experiences contained in these pages – and that it helps you find hope and strength within yourself.

Bereaved grandparents, SIDS and Kids.



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Shattered dreams

The death of a beloved grandchild is one of the hardest things a grandparent ever has to face. Your natural hopes and dreams for the future have been shattered and you have been faced with an almost unbearable tragedy. Grandparents expect that they will be able to love and enjoy their grandchildren: the natural order is that they will die before their own children – and certainly before their grandchildren.

“We tend to think of our own children as a continuation of ourselves and when grandchildren come along it means that part of us is going on into the future: the nearest thing we have to immortality.”

– Marian

“ I had envisaged [my adult children’s] future as being whole, with those special moments we could all share, the ones we all take for granted with every baby’s birth. Such little things (smiling, talking, walking and growing up).”

– Lorraine

“We have had deaths of close family before but never had [experienced] these feelings so strongly. Perhaps this time it was because it concerned a little baby who had not had a chance to grow up with us... Indeed, there is no worse nightmare than the death of a child.”

– Robert and Roberta

Grandparents' grief: a double blow

Grief: no rights and wrongs

Grief is a normal response to loss. There is nothing unusual about the feelings or thoughts you may have and there is no right or wrong way to grieve. The important thing is to both *give* and *receive* support.

Listening and caring are the two most important things that anyone can do for a person who is grieving. You need to be able to listen and care for others who are affected by the death of your grandchild but you must also be listened to, and cared for. You too, must grieve.

Grandparents experience a 'double grief' when a child dies. Not only does the death of your grandchild mean that you unexpectedly lose a treasured grandchild but also that you witness the pain and suffering of your own child. This pain is something you cannot take away. This can be difficult to accept because as a parent you expect (and desperately want) to be able to take away your child's pain. The one thing that would help your child feel better – to have their child back – is impossible. It is natural for you to feel useless, ineffective and hopeless.

With so much attention on the grieving parents you may find yourself forgotten at times. Nonetheless, grandparents' grief is as intense and painful as the grief of others. It is important to look after yourself and to acknowledge the intensity and the range of the reactions you experience.

You may feel regret that you lived too far away to participate in your grandchild's life. You may feel guilt that your grandchild died before you. Perhaps you are angry with God or sorry that the relationship with your son or daughter is not as close as it could be.

It is normal to think of these things and to experience a wide range of feelings. Sometimes you may experience all of these things ‘all at once’ and sometimes you may spend whole days dwelling on just one.

Accept also that there may be times when you feel numb and try not to feel guilty if there are moments when you feel ‘nothing at all.’ The death of a grandchild is not just a mental and emotional shock, it is a body blow.

Disbelief, shock, guilt, blame and anger are common feelings following loss. It is helpful to remember that the process of adjusting is slow and that you may mourn for a much longer time than you anticipate – or want. Three years is not an unusual length of time.

“Whatever way you grieve, know that it is the right way for you, that you are normal, and that it is healthy to grieve.”

– Dorothy

“Privately, I have varied emotions over the death of our grandson. Sometimes I feel depressed. These feelings can last for days. At other times I am happy for knowing the ‘little bloke’ and the joy he brought to all of us. I remember saying shortly after his death, ‘At least we had one Christmas with him.’”

– Mike

“After such devastation I couldn’t imagine how I could not only survive, but live and breathe without feeling pain and guilt. Guilt plays such a large part in our grief. How can you rationalise a baby dying before its grandparent?”

– Lorraine

A child suffers – yours

It can be a real struggle to ‘be there’ for an adult child who is suffering from such a monumental loss when you are feeling bereft yourself. However, being available might be the best and only thing you can do at this time.

You see your child suffering and you grieve too. This is natural although knowing this won’t make it easier or any less difficult.

“I also remember the day Rhys died and I walked into his bedroom and my son was draped over the cot crying for his little son. I walked up behind him intending to place my hands on his shoulders and comfort him. [But] I wasn’t able to say or do anything. I have never felt so inadequate as a parent.”

– Mike

“The feelings I had when Amie died are hard to explain. I was mourning for my granddaughter and I was so helpless because I couldn’t fix the hurt that [the parents] were suffering. After all, a mother is supposed to be able to take away the pain and fix things.”

– Anonymous

“I felt such a shock and terrible anger – and still do. I can’t stop crying. Everything hurts terribly. I have so much more to say but I don’t know how. I love [my daughter] Crystal but I feel pain for her for what she has had to go through. And my grandchildren – nobody knows the love I have for them.”

– Marion

“ After the fog lifted from me, there was the grief and deep hurt to see my own son suffering, the empty longing my daughter-in-law must have been feeling, and the frustration of not being able to take away their hurt, but only to be there when they needed me.”

– Ann

“ Our anger has subsided. It still resurfaces every now and then and it is tinged with sadness and regret. Yes, we lost our grandson and we grieved for him but we also had another grieving . . . our child was hurting and for the first time we couldn’t heal the hurt. This realisation added to our sorrow.”

– Robert and Roberta

“ We will always remember that on arrival we were confronted by the empty car capsule and then the empty nursery. [Our children] were grief-stricken. No parent likes to see their children distressed and, as Sam’s grandparents, we felt we were completely unable to help other than to just be with them.”

– Dorothy and Jim

“ You watch your child go through the worst nightmare of their life and you wonder where she gets her strength and courage from. We all had to go through the arraignment, trial and sentencing. He was found guilty of murder, sentenced to life and he will now appeal this sentence. He appears to have so many rights while you feel you have none.”

– Sue



Support for you and your family

Support for yourselves

Grandparents are often at a point in their lives where they may have experienced a number of losses. Perhaps you already have experience supporting family and friends through grief and loss. You need to ensure your children (the parents) have support, but it is also essential that you have support.

Do not underestimate the impact that this death will have on you. Your grief is real and painful. You need support in your own right.

Grief is an individual thing. Partners may grieve in different ways. Try to talk with your partner about your feelings and thoughts so that you better understand each other's needs. If you find it is too difficult to talk about how either of you are feeling directly, then try and discuss how to be a comfort to each other. It may be that you or your partner needs solitude or that one of you is comforted by looking at photos of your grandchild while the other finds it unbearable. It will help to know these things about each other.

We often find that grief can stir up other painful memories. Talk about your feelings with others. Friends and family members are the usual ones to turn to for a listening ear and a shoulder to cry on.

Support is also available from people who have experienced the death of a child (see support information at the back of this book).

Some people find that talking to a counsellor, general practitioner or religious adviser is helpful. Your own religious, cultural and spiritual beliefs may be of great comfort and help in dealing with your grief.

Others find reading useful. Writing a diary may help to get your thoughts and feelings off your chest. Writing poems, doing something practical and creative like gardening, building or sewing may help you to express feelings that are too difficult to put into words.

Disturbed sleep and eating patterns are not uncommon with grief. It helps to get some exercise, eat nutritious food and generally take care of yourself.

“My wife has different feelings and thoughts from me. I respect that and in no way have I tried to sway her from her opinions. Together we monitor each other, maybe not knowingly, but I’m sure we do.”

– Mike

“ On hearing [of our grandson’s death], we were devastated and went into shock; so much so that we received immediate (and ongoing) counselling from our minister and his wife. The next day, we drove from our home in Bendigo to be with Sam’s parents at Moe.”

– Dorothy and Jim

“ I found it very hard to admit that I needed help in the form of a counsellor. Even the day Ruth arrived, I told her that I wasn’t sure that I was doing the right thing in talking to her. And yet casually just sitting and chatting to her in an informal way helped me tremendously to realise that I wasn’t going mad, that all my emotions were quite normal, and that I would survive.”

– Dorothy

“ I was at a few different crossroads about what my daughter was doing after the death of my grandchild. It helped to know that others had had this experience. It was pretty harrowing. My daughter still has problems but she is learning to live with the pain and so am I.”

– Carol

“ Living in a small country town has many advantages, one of them being the support you get from the community when a tragedy like this happens. You are inundated with so much food, offers of help, visits, phone calls and flowers every day for at least three weeks after the death. Then people still drop in from time to time weeks after. There is so much compassion with country people, they all pull together in every type of situation.”

– Elsie

Supporting grieving parents

Family is where most people find care and support. It is natural that we turn to those closest to us – those who will take the time and the care needed to provide concrete, gentle and much-needed support.

No decision has to be made quickly. Ask if the parents would like help in practical ways. Create opportunities to listen and to show you care. Everyday things like shopping, preparing food and looking at photos provide these opportunities.

Following such a shocking loss, bereaved parents may feel overwhelmed by their feelings and think that everything is out of their control. So taking time, slowing down and giving your calm, unhurried support to the parents can be very helpful. It's a good idea if the parents themselves have as much control as they can manage in the circumstances.

As the parents try to come to terms with the reality of their child's death, they may want to take their own time to adapt to life without their child.

Things like sorting out the child's bedroom or nursery, or clearing up the unused bottles of baby's formula in the refrigerator, can only be done when the parents are ready.

A grieving mother once described finding some greasy little fingerprints of her child at the bottom of a wardrobe mirror – and never cleaned them off. It is a good idea to check with the parents if you want to touch your grandchild's belongings.

Avoid suggesting that the care the child received was less than adequate.

Here is what some bereaved parents said of the support they received from their parents.

“ My dad never said anything at all, but I knew from the look in his eyes that he shared my grief. The fact that they were grieving too for Alyce, really helped me...Also, they (especially mum) were the only ones who knew me well enough to give me confidence to believe in myself and that I really did the best I could at the time.”

– Angela

“ Luckily my mother and mother-in-law were around to take over his [the surviving twin's] feeding, bathing, etc, allowing me the space I needed just to exist. Everything was such an effort. If breathing had not been automatic I think I would have stopped that too.”

– Carin

“ My father said to me ‘You never ever forget’. From a man who’s always said he would love to hug and tell us he loves us, but he can’t. In that short sentence he said so much.”

– Anthony

“ Be there to listen, talk about it, let them talk, encourage them to do so. Be honest – you don’t know why it happens, it’s not ‘God’s will’. Don’t say ‘Oh you can try again’ or ‘Yes I know how you feel’ because the truth is you don’t and never will know how they feel.”

– Una

“ There was nothing I could do to make it right. All I could do was to let her know that she was still loved and that she was still worthwhile, but it took a little while for her to accept this. It was pretty harrowing at times, but I persevered. There were times when I felt that nothing that I said or did would work: even that it was making it worse.”

– Carol

“The best thing we did was to talk – all the way through. We went on some trips to the cemetery together, we looked at the photos. Sometimes we went shopping together. I had to pick my way at times when she was feeling fragile. Some days these outings were just not the best thing to do, so I just tried to ‘go with the flow’.”

– Carol



Your other children

A child's death affects many people. Your other children will have their own grief. They may see things differently and express themselves in different ways.

“ My other son, Rhys’s uncle, also suffered from the loss, not that he will talk about it, but I know he is hurting. As a parent and a grandparent your feelings are stretched across the immediate family.”

– Mike

“ We watched our other daughter, Vanessa, pick up the phone and notify friends and relatives of little Josh’s death. She asked, ‘Mum, how can I make it better for my brother, look at poor Dad. What can I do?’ She, as a daughter, sister and auntie at the age of 18, also felt devastated and useless.”

– Astrid

“I found that we all grieved in different ways at different times. To comfort, to listen, be understanding, and to have a shoulder ready to cry on, helped us all. We don’t feel ashamed, foolish or weak by showing and sharing our emotions. I feel that this is a healing process.”

– Dorothy

Friends and neighbours

Most friends and neighbours want to be helpful but sometimes they're not. They don't mean to be hurtful but very often they don't know how to respond. They may not know what to say or do for you as bereaved grandparents.

Try to ease the way by telling them what would be helpful for you. You might also say that you don't know what to say either.

“I remember getting angry when people asked how [my daughter] was coping. Of course she was hurting; but didn't they know David was hurting, that Luke was hurting, that I was hurting too.”

– Patricia

“ When I realised what was happening, I told them that I still wanted to hear about another person's grandchild, I did not want them NOT to be happy and excited over some milestone that their grandchild had achieved. That was a very hard period learning to cope with MY jealousy in their excitement. I now look at their grandchildren who were born about the same time as Nathan, and try to imagine Nathan doing the same things. Will this feeling ever end?”

– Dorothy

“We talk of David in the normal course of conversation. After all, he was part of our lives. We find it strange when others steer clear of the subject or even look awkward should they mention the name ‘David’ when speaking about someone else. How can one explain to them that they talk about yesterday or last month and the things they did, so to mention David who is also in the past is no different. He is part of our family’s past and nothing or no one can take that away from us.”

– Marian

“ How many grandchildren do we have, you may ask. We have nine – seven boys and two girls. Daniel and Christopher are always included in this number. We have had three more grandchildren since Daniel and Christopher left us and I think that those three are just a little more ‘special’ because of their brothers.”

– Robert and Roberta

Special issues

Anniversaries

‘Devotion and affection do not end with death.’

– Unknown

There are no rules about how to mark anniversaries – or which ones to mark. The parents may have ideas that are unusual and creative. There are things you can do too.

Some people donate a gift to needy children at Christmas; others visit the grave with balloons on Father’s Day. Some write a poem, add special plants to a garden, light a candle at the temple or get together with family members and browse through a photo album.

These are all ways of demonstrating that though a child has died, the bond with that child will never disappear.

“ Amie is still very much a part of our lives, she would have started school this year, so we planted a tree in the grounds of the school she would have attended.”

– Anonymous

“ My wife and I both cried on the day which would have been Rhys’s first birthday. In the New Year we will have to face the first anniversary of his death. There is no laid down procedure for these things; we don’t know what to do.”

– Mike

“ I spent the day with my daughter and her husband and many of their friends and family called in, phoned or sent flowers. We had tea together and after lighting Nathan’s Christening candle said a special prayer for Nathan. Each anniversary, birthday, Mother’s and Father’s days, Christmas and Easter we remember Nathan in some special way. How could we possibly forget such a special little boy.”

– Dorothy

Creating memories

While some of your memories are from times when your grandchild was alive there are others that you can create in your own time. Compiling photos, planting a garden, creating something out of wood or metal, writing poetry, embroidery. These are just some of the things that grandparents have done.

“ I have many very special memories of Nathan and have written a song (words and music) about him, written a poem, created a photo album of special times spent with him. I have two ‘Nathan’ roses in my garden and the photograph of an echidna painting which I did for him, talking to him whilst I was painting it, as well as the memories of the many special moments and games we shared.”

– Dorothy

Another grandchild

There may come a time when your children decide to have another baby. This can be a time of worry, joy, sad memories and hope.

“To see them deprived of their parenthood, and to hear well-meaning friends endeavouring to comfort us by saying there will be other children was very distressing to us. As parents ourselves, we knew that any subsequent child is an addition to the family, not a substitute for the one taken by death.”

– Dorothy and Jim

“ Right then I knew that this was a decision that they, the parents, would make and my role would be to support and encourage their decision, whatever that may be.”

– Barbara

“ I have found it very hard not to become over protective with my other grandchildren, not to spoil them. Every minute I spend with the children is even MORE special to me now.”

– Dorothy

“ Now, five years down the track, little Kaitlin three years old and Anthony one year – a happy family. I guess the time worn phrase ‘time heals’ is minutely true but the memory lingers and so it should. Daniel has not been replaced, he just has a sister and brother.”

– Una

Other support

Further reading

'Grieving grandparents after miscarriage, stillbirth, or infant death' Lori Leininger and Sherokee Ilse. Pregnancy and Infant Loss Center, 1985.

'For bereaved grandparents'

Margaret H. Gerner. Centering Corporation, 1990.

'Grandma's tears: comfort for grieving grandparents'

June Cerza Kolf. Baker Book House, 1995.

'Coping with grief'

Mal McKissock and Dianne McKissock. ABC Books, 1995.

'Grandparents cry twice: help for bereaved grandparents'

Mary Lou Reed. Baywood, 2000.

Other support organisations

For further assistance, you might like to look up the following associations in your phone book:

The Compassionate Friends (for those who survive their child/ren)

SANDS Australia (Stillbirth And Neonatal Death Support)

NALAG (National Association for Loss and Grief)

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Publications available from your local SIDS and Kids office

Always your child.

For SIDS families: some answers to your questions.

To family and friends: you can make a difference.

Things about Zac, my baby brother.

Another baby? The decision is yours.

Choices in arranging a child's funeral.





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SIDS and Kids Organisations

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