

'In my heart he's still there'

Children's responses to the death of a grandparent



Irene Renzenbrink MSocAdmin BA DipSocStuds
Executive Director, Griefworks International,
Victoria, Australia

Although the death of a grandparent is the first and most common bereavement that a child is likely to face, it appears to be the least discussed and researched area of childhood grief. In today's world, grandparents are increas-

ingly involved in the care of their grandchildren and yet after a grandparent's death the grief of the youngest generation often goes unacknowledged. Here two Australian studies look at the children's feelings and needs after such a death and highlight the implications for practice.

Despite the fact that the bond between grandchildren and grandparents is 'second in emotional power and influence only to the relationship between children and parents', according to Kornhaber and Woodward¹ few researchers have ever bothered to examine the meaning that grandparents hold for their children. They identify various roles that the grandparent may have in a child's life such as 'teacher, caretaker, negotiator' (between child and parent), as well as 'transmitter of language, culture, food and history'.

In situations where the child's parents have major work commitments, are separated or divorced or, for other reasons, are unable to fulfil their parenting role, modern grandparents are assuming heavier responsibility for the upbringing of their grandchildren. Even when grandparents and grandchildren are separated geographically, regular contact can be maintained through letters, gifts or by telephone, email and visits. As in the past, grandparents may become primary caregivers in the event of a parent's death.

Leading experts in the field of childhood bereavement rarely mention the impact of a grandparent's death. In his classic book, *Talking about Death*, Rabbi Earl Grollman discusses the death of a parent, sibling, friend, pet and even the impact of national tragedies, but the death of a grandparent is only mentioned in

passing². In *The Grieving Child*, Helen Fitzgerald³ writes, 'When an aged grandparent dies you may notice very little displayed grief. To children this is natural. You grow up and you grow old, you have a good life, and then you die. Because it is common today for children and grandchildren to live long distances apart and to see

EDITOR'S NOTE

It is surprising but true that there has been little research about the effects on children of losing a grandparent. They will, of course, be affected both directly and indirectly – directly, as Renzenbrink describes here, but also indirectly, inevitably, by the reaction of their parent who will have lost his or her own parent. Bereavement counsellors asked to counsel such parents will find the studies described here helpful in alerting them to the need to consider with their clients how best they could talk with their children about their own loss. The loss of a beloved grandparent, especially one who has played a significant part in the life of the child concerned, will bring forth grief – but grief that can be coped with and learned from if the child is well supported and can observe his or her own parent's coping responses. Children need to be prepared for the eventual death of old people, even before a terminal illness sets in. We have therefore made some suggestions for children's books that deal sensitively with the subject.

each other infrequently, a child's grief may be slight when a grandparent dies.'

According to Rando⁴, the death of a grandparent is a 'non-event' for some children. Raphael⁵ points out that the grief of a child after a grandparent death is likely to be 'short lived', although she does acknowledge that the closeness of the relationship and frequency of contact may influence the response.

TWO AUSTRALIAN STUDIES

The significance of the bond between grandparents and grandchildren and the profound impact of a grandparent's death on a child was clearly demonstrated by two landmark Australian studies. Not only did these studies explore what children thought and felt about their grandparent's death, they also focused on the interaction between parents and children at the time of bereavement, the children's understanding of death in general and their cultural and religious beliefs and practices.

In the first study, conducted by Canadian social worker and lecturer at The Flinders University of South Australia, Dr Carol Irizarry, a study population of 65 children aged eight to 13 years was drawn from six schools in Adelaide (30 girls, 26 boys)⁶. The children were from a predominantly Anglo-Australian and Christian background. The second study, a cross-cultural comparison and replication of the first, was conducted by the author with a group of 21 children (12 girls, nine boys) in the same age group. However, these children came from a mostly European background and were members of the progressive Jewish community in Melbourne. The time that had elapsed since the death varied from one to five years in both study groups, although most children had been bereaved for less than two years.

Working closely with counsellors and teachers at selected schools, the researchers wrote to parents of all enrolled children aged between eight and 13 years. Parents were asked to give written permission for their child's participation in the study if the child had experienced a grandparent's death. Children who wished to be interviewed signed a consent form and also agreed to the interview being taped. Parents of children who participated in the Irizarry study were also interviewed personally, and in the author's

study, asked to complete a written questionnaire. Most of the families were well educated and from an upper to middle income level.

Grounded theory approach

Both studies used a blend of qualitative and quantitative methodology based on a 'grounded theory' approach developed by Glaser and Strauss⁷. This approach requires a 'full immersion in the area of study and a constant comparative analysis, a back and forth exchange between the quantitative and qualitative data to illuminate the issues and their significance'⁸. It is a method which 'grounds' qualitative thinking in the facts and allows theoretical perspectives to emerge over time rather than attempting precise testing of a predetermined hypothesis. This method was felt to be appropriate in the complex and sensitive area of childhood bereavement where experiences and meanings are difficult to describe in quantitative terms alone. Using a semi-structured interview schedule the children were asked about the following areas and their responses analysed and categorised into various themes.

- Their relationship with the grandparent who had died
- The circumstances surrounding the death
- Their reactions to the news of the death
- Their participation in the funeral and other rituals
- Their parent's reactions to the death
- Their understanding of the phenomenon of death
- Their memories of the loss years afterwards

Children's bereavement responses

The studies were remarkably similar in their findings despite geographical, cultural and religious differences. In both study groups the children reported vivid and detailed recollections of the events surrounding their grandparent's death and clear opinions about how things could have been done differently. They were eager and willing to talk about their experiences of bereavement and the language they used was expressive and surprisingly mature.

I was really upset. I had a feeling I had never felt before. (Miriam, 10)

I would have liked to have seen him and spent more time with him. I could have communicated better. (Elly, 11)

I just had a huge lump in my stomach and throat. (Joel, 10)

I felt strange and numb in my mind. I couldn't think very well. (Bill, 11)

The children were acute observers and were well aware of inconsistencies and omissions. Many of the children had wanted more information about the circumstances of the death and most felt that their parents weren't telling them everything. The children were also protective of their parents and were especially well behaved soon after the death. They avoided asking questions that they thought might upset their parents. A number of children felt that their parents had a greater ability to 'get over' the death than they did. Others worried about the well-being and safety of their parent, surviving grandparent and others close to them.

I tried to be extra good, not fight with my brother, so that Mum wouldn't get angry and sad. (Jessica, 13)

It's something they got over very easily. I think it was harder for me. I only have one grandparent left now. (Susan, 9)

I didn't ask for the information I wanted because when I wanted to talk they were sad. (Ann, 11)

I worried about Mum. I thought she was sick and might die. (Emma, 8)

I thought I might lose another person whom I loved. (Matthew, 11)

The children thought about their grandparents and missed them very much even two to three years after the death, and longer. Their relationships had been loving and close, with the grandparent often taking the role of teacher, companion and playmate. Some children spoke about staying overnight at their grandparent's house, others of being collected from school by the grandparent or being looked after by them when they were sick. One child whose grandparent was an artist received lessons in drawing. Another remembered his grandfather helping him with his homework and being good at fixing things

We played games, make-believe games and puzzles. I played the piano for him (Helen, 12)

She made yummy chicken soup and nice salad (Rebecca, 9)

I worked in the vegetable garden with him. Sometimes I went to the beach house with him. (Allan, 11)

We talked about our day and he always cheered me up. (Simon, 11)

Many children expressed sadness and regret at no longer being able to do the things they used to do with their grandparent. They thought about them at family gatherings and special celebrations. Some of the children spoke about the things they wished they had said or done before their

grandparent's death.

I was upset in the middle of my birthday party and ran upstairs because my Poppa used to come. (Susan, 9)

I thought about grandma missing concerts. She was always so happy coming to my tap dancing and music concerts. Now she will never hear my music again. (Sally, 10)

I would have liked to have kissed her goodbye. I remember not wanting to kiss her. I regret that a lot now. (Elly, 11)

HELPING GRANDCHILDREN AFTER A DEATH

While a detailed report and analysis of the two studies described above is beyond the scope of this article, there are a number of key findings which emerged from the interviews with children. Some of these have implications for caregivers including parents, social workers, teachers and clergy.

Irizarry concluded that the children's responses were 'amazingly similar to those of adults in terms of depth of emotion, vividness of recall, the quality of descriptions, the longing for things to be different and the recognition of the mystery and magnitude of the personal death event'.

These studies certainly support the findings of the Silverman and Worden Child Bereavement Study⁹ in demonstrating the capacity of children to deeply grieve and mourn the loss of someone they love. They also show that children maintain the connection with the person who has died in memory, thought, actions and through cherished possessions ('continuing bonds').

I have this music box. It makes me think of Buba. It reminds me of her. When she died we went to her house and I asked my Dad if I could have it. (Rebecca, 9)

In my heart he's still there (Joel, 10)

It also became clear that children and parents have a tendency to protect each other. As Irizarry found, 'the children remained quiet about some of their deepest issues and parents remained unaware of many of their children's curiosities, worries, impressions and questions.' Even the most caring, well meaning and knowledgeable parents may be so deeply absorbed in the loss of their own parent that they simply do not have the time or energy to explore their children's experiences of loss and grief. This task may well fall to a close relative, friend or professional caregiver.

However, one of the children interviewed by the author had a word of caution for helping professionals. She had

seen a 'few professionals' after her grandmother's death. She said that some of them had been 'really rude and asked silly questions, like what's your favourite food?' A ten-year-old girl in the Irizarry group made a similar plea: 'For adults to understand the way a child is thinking they should talk normally as if the child was a person – and not too young to understand'.

Professionals and others working with bereaved children need to be well informed about children's bereavement responses and children's understanding of death at various ages and stages. They also need to feel relatively comfortable and at ease with children in discussing death, dying, loss and grief and to avoid protective and patronising behaviour.

Importance of individual conversations

Many grief support services for children rely on activities-based group programmes. While these activities can be helpful in reducing isolation they are not a substitute for individual conversations with children about their experiences of bereavement. Just as adults need situations of privacy and trust, children may also need special opportunities to share some of their deepest feelings or 'unfinished business' individually and alone.

One of the most poignant comments made to the author, and one which should alert us as adults and caregivers to the presence of guilt feelings in young children, came from a nine-year-old boy who said, 'I thought it was all my fault that she died because she spoiled me'. Making memory boxes and picture frames with pasta and paint is all very well but, without opportunities for intimate discussion, may trivialise or minimise the child's loss.

Involvement in rituals

A final area of concern is the involvement of children in funerals and other rituals. There was some evidence from both the author's study and the Irizarry study that many children felt excluded from these rituals and from decisions made about the form they should take. Dyregrov strongly supports the rights of children to be included in rituals¹⁰.

If we exclude them, we deny them the opportunity of being part of some of the most important family occasions. Rituals, and having participated in them, will continue to be significant throughout the child's life, and as adults we should regard the involvement of children in them as essential for their future development.

The constructive and meaningful inclusion of children in all phases of such

challenging family events, whether in situations of life-threatening illness or sudden accidents, will require a conscious and well-informed collaborative effort on the part of parents, healthcare personnel, teachers, counsellors, clergy and funeral directors.

THE WAY FORWARD

The death of a grandparent in a child's life is a major bereavement which deserves closer attention. Further research is needed to better understand the impact of such a loss and the lessons it contains for a child. How well this early bereavement experience is dealt with at a family, school and community level may have far reaching effects.

Paul Valent, a Melbourne psychiatrist and child survivor of the Holocaust, describes children as vulnerable, and 'truly dependent on adults for nurturing and for interpretation of the world of living and dying'¹¹. As adults we have a responsibility to teach children about life and death and to comfort them when they are grieving. A good selection of books for younger children on death and dying is now available, and some directed specifically at the loss of a grandparent are listed below. Reading together could be good preparation for the future, or a useful way of opening up a conversation after a death.

Rather than shield children from loss and bereavement, perhaps we can keep them informed, supported and involved in a way that will preserve and strengthen their capacity for love and attachment in the future. **BC**

References

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Orthopsychiatry 1992; **62**: 93-104.

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11. Valent P. Death and the family. *Patient Management* 1980; **9**: 11-24.

READING LIST FOR GRANDCHILDREN

Under 8s

(grandmother)

Cole H. **The Best Day of the Week***. London: Walker Books, 1997. (Two sisters and their grandfather come to terms with granny's death; for good readers or reading aloud.)
 Joslin M. **The Goodbye Boat***. Oxford, UK: Lion Books, 1998. (Told mainly through pictures; grandmother 'sails away' forever.)
 Miles, Miska. **Annie and the Old One**. Boston, USA: 1971. (A reassuring explanation of death; an American classic.)

Soros B. **Grandmother's Song**. Bristol, UK: Barefoot Books, 1998. (Mexican celebration of the continuity of life, densely illustrated.)
 Wild M. **Old Pig**. London: Viking, 1995. (Preparations for death and a gentle goodbye.)

(grandfather)

Varley S. **Badger's Parting Gifts***. London: Harper Collins, 1984. (Badger dies, but he lives on in his woodland friends' memories.)
 Cooke, T. **The Granddad Tree***. London: Walker Books, 2000. (Life cycle of a West Indian family's granddad and their apple tree.)
 Burningham J. **Grandpa***. London: Penguin, 1989. (Simple, attractive story of a little girl and her grandfather, who then dies.)
 Gray N, Cabban V. **Little Bear's Granddad***. London: Little Tiger Press, 2000. (A boy bear shares his granddad's life, and death.)

Anholt L. **The Magpie Song**. London: Heinemann, 1995. (Told through pictures and letters from Carla and her dying grandfather.)

(both)

Cole B. **Drop Dead**. London: Red Fox, 1996. (Comic, irreverent look at ageing and death.)

8-13 year olds

(grandmother)

Fine A. **The Granny Project**. London: Mammoth, 1983. (Eccentric family tries to cope with a confused granny who then dies.)
 Anderson R. **Letters from Heaven***. London: Mammoth, 1996. (No-one realises how much Lucy misses her dead step-grandmother.)
 Gleitzman M. **Water Wings**. London: Macmillan, 1997. (Pearl's adopted grandmother has terminal cancer and dies, with Pearl's help.)

* Available from Cruse Bereavement Care, 126 Sheen Road, Richmond TW9 1UR, UK. info@crusebereavementcare.org.uk

CONFERENCES

Grief across the life span. 20th King's College Conference on Death and Bereavement. 13-15 May. Ontario, Canada. Contact John D Morgan, King's College. ☎ +519 432 7946; fax +519 432 0200.

Responding to road death and injury. 6 June. London. Contact RoadPeace: ☎ 020 8838 5102; conference@roadpeace.org.uk

Sudden death – shattered lives. Child Bereavement Trust conference. 13 June. London. ☎ 01494 446648; enquires@childbereavement.org.uk