

# WHEN GRANDPA DIES

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Three weeks ago I had to make an emergency trip home to New Zealand because my brother passed away unexpectedly. He was a father of three and grandfather of two. His daughter and her family, who are currently living with them, had gone to Europe on vacation for 6 weeks and they, like me, had to make an emergency trip home. The grandchildren are four and two-years-old. I wondered how the little ones would take the news and how the parents would break it to them. They flew in from Singapore and drove immediately to Grandpa's home. As it happened, Grandpa was lying in an open casket at the house. I spoke to a family member and suggested that until the children were able to understand what had happened to Grandpa, that perhaps the casket could be covered with a light cloth. I thought they would freak out when they saw Grandpa lying so still and not waking up. I also thought they would become fearful when they saw their Mommy and Daddy so obviously distraught. Was I wrong!

We don't realize that even little children know more about death than we give them credit for. They see dead insects and birds. They hear about death in fairy tales and see it on TV programs. As parents, we find ourselves explaining why pets die and where they go. Part of the reason we find it so hard to talk about death of loved ones is because we are afraid to let our own feelings show, and we think this is not a good thing for our kids to see. When we don't communicate our feelings, and explain to kids what is happening, they can become anxious, which is the very thing we are trying to protect them from. Kids need to understand that death is just a part of life, that most people die because they are old, but some die when they are young. That it is natural to show our feelings because we will miss that person or that pet. Open communication about death gives children a clearer understanding of why it happened and where the person has gone.

When my brother's grandchildren went into the house, the casket had not been covered. Their parents were visibly upset and the little ones cried and hugged them. Would we want to miss the comfort of our children? They then looked at Grandpa. They weren't afraid. Grandpa looked as though he was sleeping. Their mom was able to tell them that Grandpa was with Jesus in Heaven and that they wouldn't see him at home any more. They accepted it. They attended the funeral so they could see what happened to Grandpa. I am sure there will be many conversations to come, but I was totally impressed by the way the parents handled the situation in the midst of their own grief.

Here are some suggestions to help children understand the circle of life: Use opportunities, as they present themselves, to explain why a person, animal, or plant died and what happens to them, or it. Respect your child's questions and answer them as honestly as you can. Only you can make the call as to how much information is too much information. It depends on their age and understanding.

Teach your kids to value life by showing them how to take care of themselves, to be protective of others, gentle and kind with animals and fish, and how to successfully tend plant life. Protect your children's minds from violent TV shows and video games. This is probably the biggest desensitizer for the value of human life. Examine your own feelings about death and seek counsel if you would like to develop a healthier response. Accept that we don't always have all the answers. Take your kids to the library, or go to the Internet for resources e.g. Hospicenet.org. If you or your children do not appear to be progressing through the grief process, then get professional help.

If you have any comments or questions on this subject, please do not hesitate to contact us at [sally@forefrontfamilies.org](mailto:sally@forefrontfamilies.org). We invite you to also check out our website at [www.forefrontfamilies.org](http://www.forefrontfamilies.org) and our blog site at [www.forefrontfamilies.blogspot.com](http://www.forefrontfamilies.blogspot.com) for further assistance.