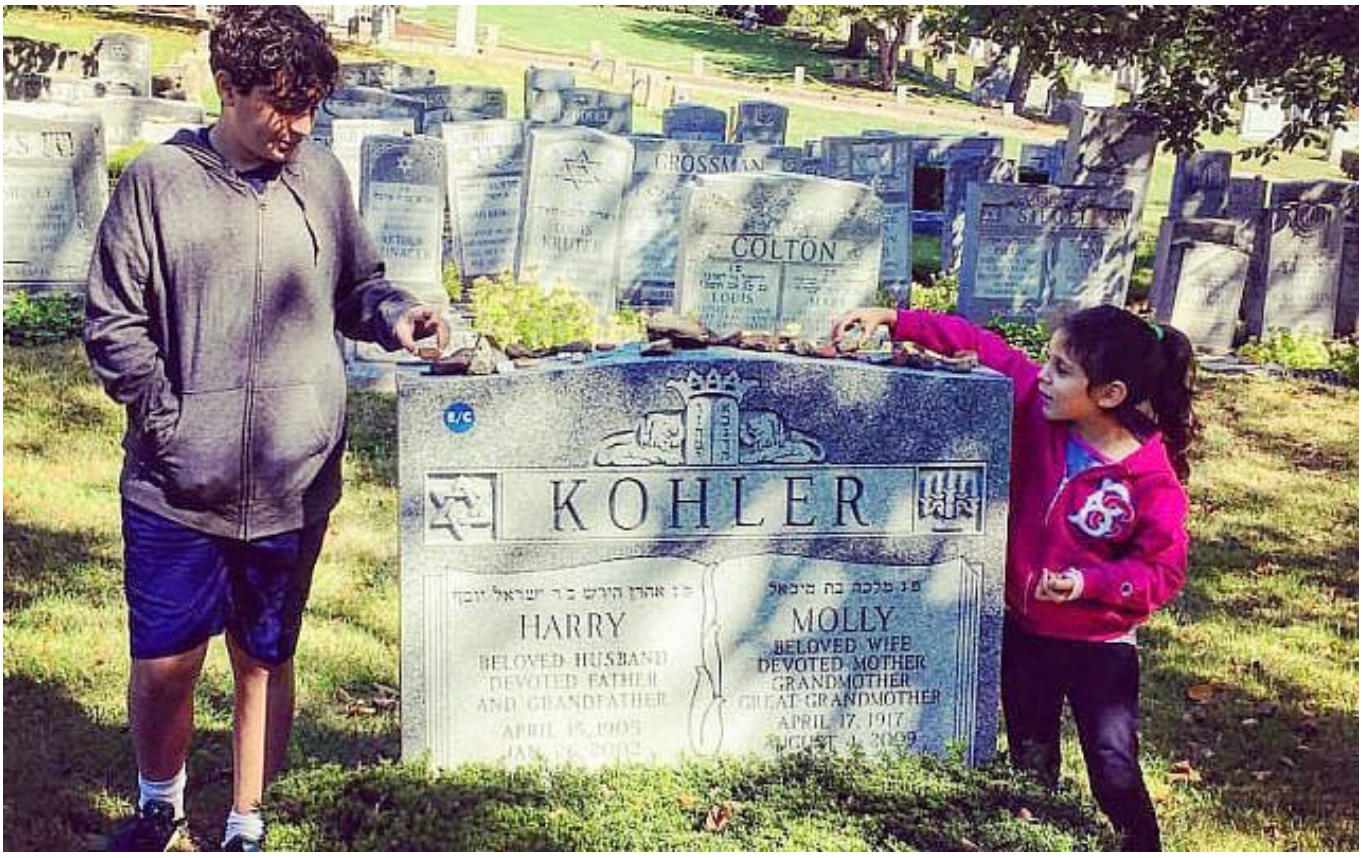

Courtesy of Shomer Collective

How to Talk with Grandchildren About Death and Dying

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Jewish Grandparents Network

PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

This guide will help grandparents normalize conversations about death with grandchildren ages five to ten. You can adapt many of the ideas for younger children too. The guide offers tips for you to respond to your grandchildren's questions about death in an age-appropriate way — with permission and guidance from your adult children (the grandchildren's parents) or other caregivers. This is not a guide to mourning or the process of grieving. At the end, we provide resources for further information and services about the dying or death of a close family member.

Other family members, educators, and anyone engaged with young children can also adapt the ideas for their own use.

Author's Note

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Introduction

Courtesy of Debra Zale Brenner

We know that death is final, irreversible, and inevitable — all living things will die. It's also a topic that can be scary for children (and adults!) and often leaves us perplexed about what to say. That means we may not discuss death at all or may use euphemisms ("Aunt Tillie passed away" or "Aunt Tillie has gone to be with God") and even untruths that can remain with children ("Grandpa is sleeping"). As grandparents, we have an opportunity to take a bold step and normalize conversations about death and dying with our grandchildren.

In Jewish tradition, the body and soul are seen as existing together when we are alive; at the time of death, the soul begins its journey of separation from the body. Elements of Jewish liturgy acknowledge and recognize our mortality; for example, in the Modeh/Modah Ani prayer upon waking, we say, "Thank you, God, for returning my soul to me." Similarly, many of our Bible stories, especially of our ancient ancestors, tell of death and dying. For example, read about the death of Jacob in the Torah portion Vay'chi (Genesis 47:28–50:26).

The Jewish value of *zikaron* (remembrance) is woven through our tradition and guides us to keep alive and honor the memories of those who have died. We include many examples below in the section "Ways to Remember."

In the guide, we address the following topics:

1. Talking to Grandchildren About Death Without Fear
2. General Guidance when Talking with Children About Death
3. Ages and Stages
4. Visiting the Cemetery, Going to Funerals and Shiva
5. Ways to Remember
6. Resources

1. Talking to Grandchildren About Death Without Fear

How do we manage our own fear of dying to be able to discuss death in a matter-of-fact way with our grandchildren?

Keep in mind the following key ideas when talking with children ages five to ten.

- Discuss with your adult children (the parents of your grandchildren) if, when, and how they would like you to discuss death and dying with their children. What are they comfortable with your saying to their children? ("I want to make sure I'm aligned with you.") This step is crucial!

Courtesy of Pexels

- Talk about death early. It will reduce the mystery and the pressure when someone in the family is approaching death or has died. Be frank about the permanence of death.

- When possible, ground the conversation in Jewish wisdom and practice — for example, by explaining what shiva is or referring to the Jewish value of *zikaron* (remembrance).
- Address death matter-of-factly, without using euphemisms ("Uncle Solly passed") or telling untruths ("Grandma Sylvia is sleeping"). Young children are literal and will take these statements to heart. When possible, use *died* rather than *passed* or *passed away*. Try to be attuned to the language bereaved family members are comfortable with.
- Use nature as an analogy for death; for example, in the fall, the leaves change color and fall off the trees — all living things die.
- Be proactive; look for opportunities to bring up the names of and stories about relatives who have died. For example, if you light Shabbat candles with your grandchildren, show them a *yahrzeit* candle and explain that you light it once (or more) a year to remember [insert name] who has died. Telling stories and remembering the deceased helps demystify death and chip away at children's fears.

Photographer Stephanie Fink

- Have the conversation — even if you live at a distance from your grandchildren. For example, on Zoom or FaceTime, tell stories or show photos of relatives who have died. One grandparent told us: "I light *yahrtzeit* candles for my parents, my sister, my grandparents. I tell my children and grandchildren that the *yahrtzeit* is coming up and I send them photos. I tell them a little bit about the person I am remembering. It comforts me."

2. General Guidance when Talking with Children About Death

When we normalize the discussion of death, we show our grandchildren that it is okay and quite normal to miss or have other big feelings about a close person who has died.

If your own family has experienced a death, remember that you are not alone. Helping children see their experience as one that is shared by all people, and felt most acutely by their immediate family and friends, can help them understand the cycle of life — that everything alive will eventually die, and new people and creatures will be born.

The death of someone in the news is a good opportunity to open the conversation ("I was just reading an article about _____").

Below are some general tips for talking with grandchildren about death:

- Prepare for the conversation. Clarify your own beliefs about death first (as much as you are able). For example, do you believe the soul lives on in another form? Do you believe we live on in others?

Courtesy of Pexels

- Speak in a matter-of-fact way.
- Only answer — in an age-appropriate way — what the child is asking. For example, if the child is asking about what is written on the stone, it is not necessary to talk about burial practices.
- Recognize that children learn from other sources (parents, friends, TV, books). Encourage them to ask questions about what they've seen or heard.
- It's okay not to know all the answers. Learn and come back to the conversation.
- Sometimes it is easier to have important, close conversations at bath or bedtime.
- You may find it helpful not to hold direct eye contact, which can be threatening to a child. For this reason, conversations while you are driving may feel more natural.
- Family members, especially in mixed heritage (multifaith) families, may have very different religious traditions and beliefs about death. Be sure to discuss with the parents of the grandchildren what is okay, or not okay, to discuss. For example, the parents may be comfortable with your reading bible stories — which often include tales of life and death — but not talking about what happens to us after we die.

It may be hardest of all for you to talk with your grandchildren about your own death. Weave statements into conversation, as appropriate, such as, "I'm not going to live forever, but I expect to be around with you for a long, long time."

My own 6-year-old granddaughter recently said to me, "Gran, when you die, I'm going to put flowers on your grave and I'm going to cry because I'll miss you so much. Then I'll say, 'Gran, I hope you come alive again.'" I quite neutrally told her I know she will miss me and will cry, but I will not come alive again.

If a relative or close friend is sick with a serious health condition or is old and close to dying, you might tell young grandchildren, "Their body is not working the way it used to." There are many ways to maintain connection to the dying person. For example, your grandchild can still hold that person's hand, draw pictures to hang up on their wall, sing songs, or watch movies together. See "Resources" below for more information.

As appropriate, help your grandchild say goodbye as death is close. This can help the child feel involved, may give them a sense of pride and responsibility, and can remove some of the mystery of death. Even if the dying person cannot respond or grasp the child's hand, they can still hear them. Allow the expressions of words, feelings, and touch.

Note: Children who are *required* to visit a dying person will often remember being forced to visit more than the experience itself. Instead, encourage the child to express themselves to the person in writing or drawing, or other creative avenues that will bring light and closure to both the child and the dying person.

3. Ages and Stages

Photographer Terry Kaye

Psychologists tell us that by age 4 children can begin to understand the concept of permanency. They understand that everything that is alive will eventually die. Use the cycles of nature to talk with young grandchildren about this reality. Be literal and concrete. For example, point out the sound of dead leaves crunching under your shoes. Or a dead bug. By age 5, children know that people who have died are not coming back.

At all ages, avoid euphemisms. Rabbi Phyllis Sommer, whose son Sammy died at the age of 8, said in a TEDx Talk (May 2015): "Language matters. The words that we say matter. They matter for truth; they matter for honesty; and they matter for reality."

In other words, speak plainly, clearly, and simply. Use a direct and respectful way of talking about death. Rabbi Sommer: "It's not giving power to death to speak its name.... shrouding and clouding death in pretty, sugar-coated phrases actually can increase fear and mystery....Dead is dead."

Shomer Collective shows the ages and stages of children's understanding of death:

Toddlers/Preschoolers

- See death as temporary
- Concrete thinkers
- Language matters/no euphemisms

Elementary School Aged Children

- Understand finality of death
- Worry about what will happen to *them*

Tweens/Young Teens

- Understand death, have confused emotions about it
- Start thinking "philosophically" about death
- Often have feelings of guilt/regret

For information on ages and stages, visit The Dougy Center or see "Resources" below.

4. Visiting the Cemetery, Going to Funerals and Shiva

Visiting the cemetery with grandchildren normalizes the experience. Ideally, it is best not to have their first visit be for the funeral of a close relative.

If you visit the graves of family members as an outing or for an outdoor stroll:

- You might say, "We're going to see the place where we put Bubbe's body. We miss Bubbe very much."
- Point out the names on the tombstones. Perhaps your grandchildren are named after the deceased. This is an excellent opportunity to tell a story about the loved one.
- Talk about the people. What can the children deduce from the inscriptions on the headstones? For example, if they see, "Family is everything," what story can they make up about the person buried there? This also helps children understand that, although death is final, the person's memory lives on and they do not disappear.

Courtesy of Debra Zale Brenner

- It is customary to leave stones on a grave when one visits the cemetery. One grandparent told us, "We painted rocks with the 3- and 4-year-old grandchildren, and they put the rocks on the new headstone."

If children are going to the cemetery for the funeral of a close relative, talk to them in advance about what the experience might be like; for example, "We may have to park on a little road in the cemetery and walk to the gravesite; sometimes the ground is muddy…." You might also say, "It's like going to services on Shabbat — a rabbi or other leader will be saying prayers/talking up front…. Sometimes there is singing and not everyone will know the words….The body will be in a coffin so none of us can see it….people will shovel dirt into the grave to cover the coffin…."

Recently, a five-year-old went to her grandfather's funeral in New York. She asked, "Is PopPop in that box? What will happen to his body?" His grandmother said, "yes, he is in the box and soon his body will look like a skeleton." The child seemed satisfied with that answer.

Read more about visiting the cemetery with children here.

Traditionally, Judaism has well defined rituals that move us through the process of death and mourning.

Courtesy of Jewish Future Promise

i) **Aninut:** The period between death and burial.

ii) **Levayah/Funeral:** Traditionally, the burial takes place within 24 hours of death. However, many people wait until close family members are able to travel for the funeral.

iii) **Meal of Consolation:** Repast held after the funeral. This meal often includes traditional foods such as hard-boiled eggs or other round foods, such as bagels or challah rolls, to symbolize the circle of life.

iv) **Shiva:** Mourning period of seven days (many people observe one or three days, or even a few hours) during which visitors come to pay their respects to family members.

v) **Sh'loshim:** Period of 30 days counted from the day of burial.

vi) **Year of Mourning:** Traditionally, children say the Mourner's Kaddish for eleven or twelve months after the death of a parent.

vii) **Unveiling:** A formal ceremony after the placement of the tombstone, held within the first year after death.

viii) ***Yahrzeit:*** The yearly anniversary (on the Hebrew calendar) of a loved one's death.

ix) **Yizkor**: Public memorial service for the dead recited four times a year during holiday synagogue services.

In general, when children are involved in the rituals surrounding death, it can help normalize their own pain. For example, if you take them to a shiva house, they may see others crying and that family and friends are together and supporting each other. Of course, this depends on who died and how, and whether the person lived a long and full life.

Photographer Sara Pilavin

A grandmother recently told us, "Shiva is at our house and has been fun for the kids as there are cousins and tons of kids here in the evening playing outside while the parents pay their respects to the family." Shiva can be as much about supporting the living as it is about remembering the deceased.

Read more about the stages of mourning here.

5. Ways to Remember

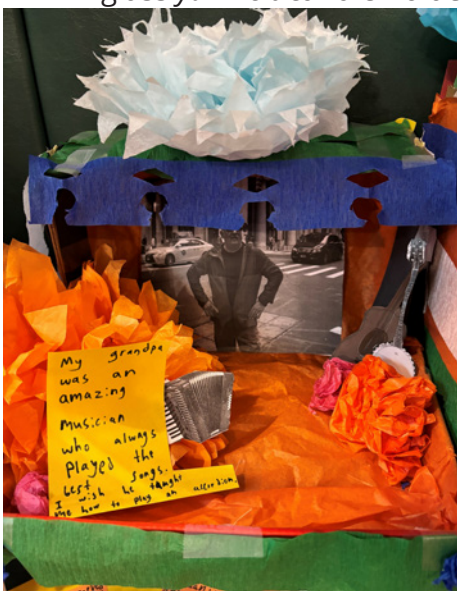
Grief for the death of a loved one may be acute at holiday times, when their participation is woefully missed. Jewish wisdom can support us in these moments by creating opportunities to make their memory for a blessing.

Courtesy of Ilene Vogelstein

Try to ground the conversation in the Jewish value of *zikaron* (remembering).

Below are ways to turn memories of the dead, including grandparents, into blessings for the living, including children. For example, we might say something like, "We're not going to see Bubbe anymore, but we can talk about her, and look at photos of her, and make her matzah ball soup."

- Tell stories about the people your grandchildren are named after. Grounding children in family stories has been shown to build resilience.
- Use objects and clothing from loved ones who have died — for example, Zayde's challah knife or Kiddush cup, Grandma's hand-embroidered tablecloth, family recipes. Share family tunes, songs, prayers, and blessings.
- Remember a loved one annually by taking action in their memory; for example, plant a tree, give tzedakah, eat favorite foods on the person's birthday, paint the tall glass *yahrzeit* candle holder, paint the rocks to put on the headstone, do service in their memory. As an example, you might go to the deceased relative's senior home to visit and take cookies for the residents.



Courtesy of Elysian Charter School, Hoboken, NJ

- At the holidays, keep the mood upbeat if it's a happy occasion, even when recognizing a relative who has died. While we don't want the occasion to be gloomy, we may want to acknowledge that we feel sad and miss the person. For example, If the grandkids are making place cards for the Passover seder, acknowledge they are not making one for Grandpa: "That makes us sad. In his memory, we made his favorite potato kugel." Don't dictate the feelings, but allow the kids to express theirs.

- Create your own rituals. A Jewish Grandparents Network Facebook member suggests: “What about a ritual where the children blow the bubbles and notice the beautiful rainbow of colors swirling in them? They can tie that in with the idea of promise (like Noah and the flood) and the shared love they send out to their deceased relative, especially when they see a rainbow in the sky.”
- Give money in the deceased person’s memory to the charities they gave to when alive.

Courtesy of Pexels

- Look at photos and videos together. Digitize old films and share them with family members, especially if they live far away.
- Connect the deceased to daily living, for example, by using Grandma’s food-stained recipe cards in an index card box.

Photographer Terry Kaye

- Use Bubbie’s scarves for the unveiling, then remove them.
- Bring to life the professions of deceased relatives. For example, if Grandpa was a jeweler, use his loupe to examine small items.
- A grandparent recounts: “I purchased a memory game using the photos of my grandparents and those who died before us. We use the photos to talk about the people and share memories.”

In summary, fill the empty chair at the table with the blessing of memories.

Consider, What are the memories you count as blessings in your own life?

6. Resources

Books for Children About Illness, Death, and Dying

https://www.kveller.com/talking-to-your-children-about-death-these-books-can-help/

https://pjlibrary.org/blog/january-2017/childrens-books-about-death

The Loving Wind, by Gabe Goldman

The Year of Mourning: A Jewish Journey, by Rabbi Lisa D. Grant (for adults)

Where Is Poppy? by Caroline Kusin Pritchard

Grief Support

https://www.dougy.org/program-finder

HealthyChildren.org

https://jewishgrandparentsnetwork.org/video-library/ See specifically:

Courtesy of Jewish Grandparents Network

- "Filling the Empty Chair: Honoring and Remembering Grandparents and Loved Ones Who Have Died" (January 15, 2025)
- "Grandparents, Tell Your Story to the Next Generation: How to Pass on Your Legacy" (November 12, 2024)
- "How to Talk with Grandchildren About Death and Dying" (September 12, 2023)

https://sesameworkshop.org/resources/remembering-loved-ones/

https://www.shomercollective.org/

https://www.sollevinson.com/copy-of-children-and-grief

https://www.todaysparent.com/family/family-life/how-to-talk-to-kids-about-death-2/

Jewish and Other Mourning Rituals

https://www.jewbelong.com/lifecycle/death-mourning/

https://kavodvnichum.org/

https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/timeline-of-jewish-mourning/

https://reformjudaism.org/beliefs-practices/prayers-blessings/grief-and-memory-prayer-passover-yizkor

Photographer Simon Feil

https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/finding-yourself-at-the-cemetery/

Hello, Goodbye: 75 Rituals for Times of Loss, Celebration, and Change, by Day Schildkret

Poetry

Marge Piercy, Art of Blessing the Day — especially Kaddish poem

Mary Oliver, The Summer Day

Additional Jewish Texts About Death and Dying Recommended by Shomer Collective

- Chayei Sarah — Abraham takes care of the business of death at the height of his grief (not ideal) and plans for future generations (ideal).
- Vay'chi — Jacob gives instructions to Joseph on what to do with his body after Jacob dies; Joseph agrees to honor his dad's wishes.
- Babylonian Talmud *Shabbat* 153a — Rabbi Eliezer teaches his students they should repent one day before death, always being prepared for the inevitable.
- Abraham Joshua Heschel on Death
- Yehuda Amichai, "May I Rest in Peace"

Courtesy Debra Zale Brenner

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