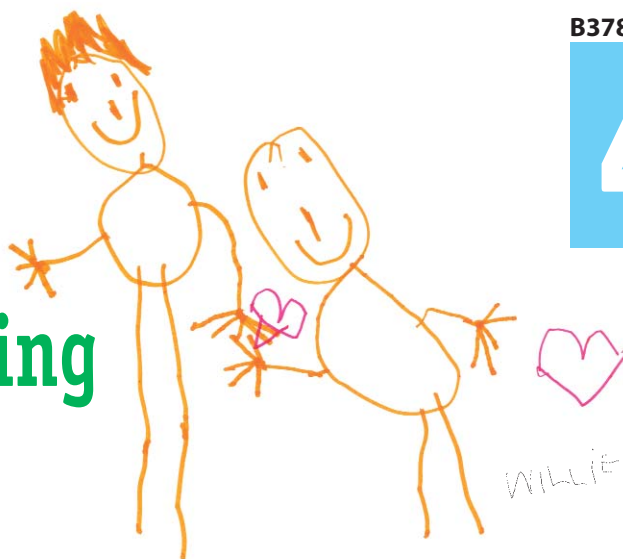


Through the eyes of a child

# Grandparents raising grandchildren



## Disruptions in close relationships: How they affect a child's behavior, thoughts, and feelings

**M**ajor changes in a young child's life can profoundly alter not just where they live, but how they respond to others. This fact sheet focuses on types of disruptions; describes common behaviors, thoughts, and feelings children experience when they're separated from their parents; and where to turn if you or your grandchild needs help coping.

### What is a disruption?

A disruption is an event that brings major changes to the daily schedule and activities of a child's life. Such changes may range from a temporary separation caused by parental illness or depression to long-term or permanent separation due to abuse or abandonment by the parent(s), jail time, or death.

Severe and permanent disruptions, such as the death of a parent, can dramatically alter almost every part of a child's life including where they live, how they relate to others, their sleeping and eating habits, where they go to school and how they perform, and how they view life.

### Stages of coping

Children respond to disruptions differently from adults. Their behaviors, thoughts, and feelings are not those of "mini-adults." Young children are often unable to verbalize how they feel.

Children temporarily separated from their parents sometimes experience three stages of coping: protest, despair, and detachment.<sup>1</sup> The following chart outlines the behaviors, thoughts, and feelings children may go through during each stage. Not all children experience each stage, nor do they necessarily experience them in the same order. Still, this can be a useful guide for understanding how children cope when someone they love is gone.

It's important to remember that you, your grandchild, and the situation are unique. For example, one child may act out when separated from their parent where another may seem relieved. Following the death of a parent, one child may withdraw from his surroundings while another may soon return to her daily activities, seemingly unaffected by the loss. Since each situation is different, it is impossible to know fully how a child will think, act, and feel.



## Common reactions of children coping with separation and other major life changes

Stage of coping	Acting	Thinking	Feeling
<b>Protest</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cries frequently, distressed</li> <li>Makes strong efforts to find missing parent</li> <li>Acts out toward new caregiver</li> <li>Refuses to comply with adults' requests</li> <li>Quiet and withdrawn</li> <li>Acts out during play</li> <li>Temper tantrums or angry outbursts</li> <li>Crabby, grouchy, hard to please</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Actively thinks about parent's location and return</li> <li>Blames others and/or self for loss of parent</li> <li>Dissatisfied with new living arrangement, idealizes old arrangements</li> <li>Confused about where the parent is</li> <li>Maintains hope that parent will return</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Angry at self, parent, and/or new caregiver</li> <li>Intense sadness</li> <li>Feels frightened and alone</li> <li>Feels loyal to parents</li> <li>Fear or worry that parent may never return</li> <li>All of the above at the same time (confusion and ambivalence)</li> </ul>
<b>Despair</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Quiet and withdrawn</li> <li>Fails to respond to others</li> <li>Loss of energy</li> <li>Lacks interest in activities</li> <li>Easily distracted</li> <li>Acts younger than age</li> <li>Irritable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Blames self for situation</li> <li>Believes that liking the new living arrangement may be "disloyal" to parent</li> <li>Worries that parent may not return</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Angry at self, parent, and/or new caregiver</li> <li>Nervous, anxious</li> <li>Fearful, easily frightened</li> <li>Frustrated</li> <li>Wants attention</li> <li>Confused</li> </ul>
<b>Detachment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Quiet and withdrawn</li> <li>Renewed energy and interest in life and activities</li> <li>Makes new friends</li> <li>Develops new routines</li> <li>May be unusually friendly, affectionate toward strangers or may show intense fear of strangers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Considers future without parent and with new caregiver</li> <li>Thinks about and enjoys daily activities again</li> <li>May believe that relationships are not stable</li> <li>May believe that relationships are not important</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased acceptance that parent will not return</li> <li>Sense of loss or mourning for parent</li> <li>Positive feelings toward new caregiver</li> <li>Feels engaged with the new environment</li> <li>Depression</li> </ul>

## Setbacks in coping

You may find that your grandchild suffers occasional setbacks in how well he or she is coping.<sup>2</sup> The trigger may be a special event such as a holiday or celebration. Other things that may cause a behavior setback include illness, death of a person or pet, seeing the parent again, or moving to a new home or school. Even hearing other children talk about their own parents may rekindle strong feelings. During these times, your grandchild needs extra support, love, and sensitivity.

## How a child handles stress during a disruption

Many factors play into how a child handles stress; the following list describes some of the most important.<sup>3</sup>

- The child's biological make-up (temperament, genes)
- How often a disruption or major life change occurs
- If the child experiences trauma during these changes
- Other positive relationships in a child's life
- If there were major changes in other parts of a child's life
- Support from friends and neighbors
- Contact with siblings and other positive family members

## Resilience: What helps?

Children develop resilience as they overcome difficult times in their lives. Researchers have found that certain characteristics and family situations make a significant difference in how a young child responds to stress and how easily he or she rebounds.<sup>4</sup>

### Within the child

- The child is usually easy-going and calm.
- The child has positive communication skills (understanding the situation and being able to talk about it).
- The child has good problem-solving skills.

### Within the family

- Family size. Children from smaller families tend to be more resilient.
- Parents' education level. Children of parents with more education tend to handle stress better than those of less-well educated parents.
- The child has positive relationships with siblings.
- The child has a close relationship with someone important.

## Helping your grandchild cope

There are some steps you can take to help your grandchild adjust to the changes. These include:

- Offer plenty of love and support. Being with people they love and trust helps children feel safe.
- Follow a routine. Change can be very upsetting for young children; if they know what to expect each day they will feel more in control of their life.
- Help your grandchildren express their feelings. Young children often lack the words to describe how they feel and may need your help learning how to put their feelings into words.
- Encourage friendships with peers and siblings.
- Assign chores so the child will feel helpful.
- Seek out supportive teachers at school.
- Try to ensure a stable school setting.



## Where to go for help

If you're worried about your grandchild or are feeling overwhelmed yourself, there are many sources of support available:

- Talk to a trusted friend who is not directly involved in the situation
- Talk to your grandchild's teacher or day care provider
- Talk to your grandchild's pediatrician or family doctor
- Talk to your pastor, rabbi, priest, or spiritual counselor
- Join a support group for grandparents raising grandchildren
- Contact your kinship care worker
- Contact your county Extension office
- Contact a licensed psychologist, psychiatrist, or social worker in your area
- Contact a child welfare agent
- Call a parental stress hotline
- Contact your local early intervention program
- Look for respite care

## Questions to ask yourself

### Behavior

- Is my grandchild's behavior due to the family situation or is it similar to that of most children this age? Could my reaction to the behavior be making the problem worse?
- Do I know my grandchild well enough to know how she usually responds? How does my grandchild respond to stress? How does he respond to something new? How does he respond to something fun?
- Do I take time to understand *why* my grandchild is acting the way she is? Is she tired? Sad? Hungry? Frustrated? Do I help her name and understand her feelings?

### Stability and routines

- What is my schedule on a typical day? Is it pretty much the same from day to day or does it vary considerably? Does my grandchild know what to expect each day?
- How does my grandchild respond to changes in routine? Is my grandchild flexible or does he need a routine for comfort?
- Is this a temporary or permanent change for the child? If temporary, how long will it last?

## Communication

- Throughout the day, do I take time to listen to what my grandchild is saying (and not saying)? What do his behaviors tell me?
- Do I encourage my grandchild to talk about her feelings? Does she need help learning how to put her feelings into words?
- Do I need help sorting out my own feelings and expressing them appropriately?

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Bowlby, J. *Attachment and Loss*. 3 vols. New York: Basic Books, 1969–1980.
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- <sup>4</sup> Werner, E.E. Protective Factors and Individual Resilience. In *Handbook of Early Childhood Intervention*, 2nd ed, edited by J.P. Shonkoff and S.J. Meisels. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.



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### Grandparent groups:

Second Time Around/Mary Dobbs  
Family Resource Center

Grandparents Parenting Again/  
Waukesha Women's Center

Grandparents Raising  
Grandchildren Support Network  
of Winnebago County

### Artists:

William Boyd, age 6  
Catherine DeGuire, age 10  
David Michael DeGuire, age 6  
Isabel Meyer, age 6  
Jenna Sandy, age 6  
Max Sandy, age 7



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This fact sheet is part of a series. To obtain the rest of the set, visit the University of Wisconsin-Extension grandparenting web site at [www.uwex.edu/relationships/](http://www.uwex.edu/relationships/). For more information about this series, contact Mary Brintnall-Peterson, University of Wisconsin-Extension or Julie Poehlmann, University of Wisconsin-Madison.