

GRAND RESOURCE

*Help for
Grandfamilies
Impacted by
Opioids and Other
Substance Use*



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Talking with a Child about their Birth Parent

// I would always tell him I am here with you, for you, I am not going anywhere. This gave him the security he needed. I would tell him every day how much I loved him and show him affection with a hug as often as he wanted one. A kiss good night after a story read from a book of his choice. It's not just a talk but backing up the words you tell your child. That is the most important"

Tim, Grandparent Caregiver

As the primary caregiver for your relative child, you will most likely be the person they come to with questions about their birth parents. It is important to have honest and age-appropriate responses to their questions about why they live with you and what their birth parents are doing. These can be emotional and difficult conversations especially when the child's parents are struggling with a substance use disorder. This fact sheet is designed to help prepare you to respond to the child's questions and consider the impact that their questions may have on your own emotions.

How do I talk with my relative child about his birth parents in general?

Be honest, fair and non-judgmental when talking about the parents. Try to focus on the positives of the parents. For example, "Your dad loves you so much" and "Your mom works hard to get better so she can see you more often."

Do not talk disrespectfully about the parents if there is any possibility the child will hear it or if it could get back to them. It is good practice not to talk disrespectfully about the parents at all, but occasionally venting to a trusted person is okay. Remember that the child still loves their parents and may want to have a good relationship with them.



How do I talk with my relative child about her parent having a substance use disorder?

Many children of people with substance use disorders are taught to be secretive and not talk about certain things from a young age. Because of this, it is especially important to be honest with them about their parents. Be age appropriate and use language that is easy to understand. Do not hide things from them. For example, if their parent is in the hospital or back in treatment let the child know if it is appropriate given their age and relationship. This helps model honest communication for the child and helps the child know they can trust you.

Let the child know that their parent is sick and not a bad person. Say something like "Mommy is sick and trying to get better." Above all, remind the child that this is not their fault and that they are loved.

When talking about the parent's substance use disorder, keep conversations focused on the parent's use and how it makes the child feel. Reserve conversations about the child's own alcohol and drug use for separate conversations, if age appropriate.

How do I let my relative child know there are other families like ours?

Your relative child may feel like they are the only child living with someone other than their birth parents. Let them know that families are incredibly diverse and that many families look like yours does. Read books about diverse families with them. Look for support groups for children who are living with their grandparents, other relatives or foster parents and/or for children with parents who have substance use disorders. Check in with their school's assistance program to see if there are any resources or groups within the school. If you go to a grandfamily support group, see if any of your group members want to have playdates.

How do I manage my own feelings about the birth parents in relation to their relationship with the child?

Managing your own feelings about the birth parents is not easy. Your feelings are valid no matter what they are. As the caregiver, it is important to be aware of your own feelings, how you share them and how they impact the child. Identify a trusted friend or professional to talk with about these feelings when there is no possibility the child could overhear the conversation. Look into different support groups that can help you find people in the same situation who can give you advice or just listen to you.



How can I respond about my own feelings in a healthy way if my relative child asks?

It is okay to share your feelings about their birth parents if you can do it with love and respect. Be honest about how you feel. Say something like, "I am upset with how Mommy acted. It makes me feel sad, angry, and confused, but she is still my daughter. I love her just like I will always love you."

It is important for the child to understand that the birth parent has a disease. Assure the child that their birth parent loves them but may not show that love due to how drugs affect their brain.

// Talking to my grandchildren about their parents was really hard because in my mind I failed as a parent"

Victoria Gray, Grandparent Caregiver

How do I talk to my relative child about the death of their birth parent?

It can be very difficult to talk to a child about the death of their parent, let alone when you are grieving yourself. It is important to know that young children most likely will not understand death or how to process their feelings. It is common for them to be confused or feel deep sadness, fear, or anger. They may or may not want to talk about the loss and how it makes them feel. Processing their feelings may come out in the form of crying, screaming, bedwetting, or acting out in some way.

Many grieving children can benefit from counseling, a support group, or another program for children experiencing grief. Check with your local hospice organizations, mental health programs, and insurance company to see what they offer.

Find age-appropriate ways for them to express their feelings. Some options include drawing, writing letters, a memory book, a picture book, and a notebook or journal of their own. It may be difficult for the child to remember positive memories of their parent. You can help by reminding them of the good times they had together and how much their parent loves them.

How do I talk with my relative child about their parent in prison?

It is always important not to lie to the child you are raising. Explain to them gently and honestly that the birth parent broke the law and is now in jail or prison. Share that this does not mean their parent is a bad person. Let the child know that they can write letters, draw pictures, send photos or visit their parent if the prison allows it. Some prisons have programs to make family visits easier, so you can call the prison and ask about visitation and correspondence.



Further Resources - Talking with A Child about their Birth Parent

- National Association for Children of Addiction (NACoA)
- American Society of Addiction Medicine "What The Heck Is Opioid Addiction?"
- Amazon's Best Selling Children's Books on Substance Abuse
- An Elephant in the Living Room by Jill M. Hastings and Marion H. Typpo

Further Resources - Grandfamilies

- grandfactsheets.org
- grandfamilies.org
- gu.org
- brookdalefoundation.net/RAPP/rapp.html





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