

Kids Will Ask Questions

Marcy Maler

When a family member is diagnosed with dementia everyone in the family is affected, including children and grandchildren.

Children will watch their parents' reactions, feel their sadness, and hear their frustration. When children visit a loved one with dementia, they may become scared or confused. Being honest with them in an age-appropriate way can help ease their concerns. They may even feel comfortable assuming a small role in caregiving.

Being told the truth helps children develop coping skills. Children may wonder if they have caused this stress or may worry about how they now fit into family's changing needs and priorities. Helping children understand what is happening to their older relatives provides reassurance and direction.

It is hard to know how much to explain to a child when a family member has dementia. Although the person may decline slowly, children will notice subtle changes: a forgotten name, repetitive narratives, or something similar. Begin with educating yourself so you can answer a child's questions. Books provide information, encourage questions, and open up conversations about feelings and concerns.

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Pre-school age children: Small children are primarily focused on what is going on at the moment. Simple explanations are usually enough: "Grandma just forgets these things." And, since young children tend to forget, expect to repeat your explanation. Setting a time limit for your



visit is a good idea because both kids and your loved one will tire. If little ones make a lot of noise, or run up and down the halls, it can overwhelm a person with dementia. If a child feels uncomfortable or frightened during the visit, he might prefer to sit on a parent's lap during a visit with your loved one. This is normal, so let them find their comfort zone.

School-age children: As children come to a greater understanding of the concept of illness, they look for more information. Talk with your child ahead of time. Tell her about any changes she might see in her loved one since the last visit. Reassure her that it is part of the illness and has nothing to do with her. It may be helpful to name the illness: "Dementia is a disease that causes the brain to change. His brain is changing. Sometimes these feelings make him feel confused (or afraid or angry). Sometimes these feelings cause him to do or say things that he doesn't mean. It is still your grandpa that has always loved you, but he is different because of the dementia."

This is an appropriate age to delegate caregiving tasks. Let your child go get him a glass of water or a snack, read

alzheimer's association®

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24-Hour Helpline:
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Tips & Tools

Common Questions:

Q: Will my mom get it too? Will I?

A: Most people who develop this are older. Many scientists believe that there's a greater chance of getting the disease if someone in your family has it, but not everyone who's related will get it.

Q: Why does my grandpa call me by my dad's name?

A: Changes deep inside your grandfather's brain may make it difficult for him to remember things like your name. This is not your fault or his. You may remind him of your dad at your age. It's best to not correct him, as that could upset or frustrate him.

Q: Why does my aunt keep asking the same question?

A: People with dementia often remember events that happened years ago, but forget things that happened yesterday or even a few minutes ago. Your aunt may not remember that she already asked a question. It's important to be patient and respond, even if you've already done so.

Book Resources for Kids

Memory Box

Mary Bahr, David Cunningham (Illustrator)
Albert Whitman Concepts, 1992

Why Did Grandma Put Her Underwear in the Refrigerator

Max Wallack, Carolyn Given
CreateSpace, 2013

the newspaper to him, or take a walk with him. Tasks like these will help a child feel involved without being too demanding or overwhelming.

With younger children, unexpressed feelings can be manifest as changes in behaviors and attitudes, problems in school, or with friends. Watch for signs that your child is upset. A school counselor or social worker can help you mediate the problem as well as help your child in coping.

Teen-age children: A teenager may find it hard to accept the changes in a loved one. They have spent more time with the loved one, have shared memories, and they may experience grief from the loss of the once-vibrant relationship. Talk about the grief and help mediate it. Additionally, feelings of impatience, embarrassment, or discomfort may arise. Encourage your teen to interact with the grandparent. Listen to or play music together, play a game, read stories, keep a journal together, or go through photo albums together.

Children of all ages: Never leave children in charge of Grandma or Grandma in charge of babysitting. There are too many risk factors. A 10-year old can't pick Grandma up off the floor if she falls. And Grandma can't chase after a 3-year old. A teen can easily convince Grandma to lend him the keys to the car. Define boundaries and oversee safety for both your loved one and your child.

Adult children: Although no longer a dependent, an adult child may have a difficult time adjusting to Mom or Dad having dementia.

Ensure that she has access to dementia education. An adult child may be your greatest support in caregiving, so be sure to enlist his help and participation in caregiving. As always, having information about a problem is the best way to adjust to it and learn how to cope.



Regardless of age, talk to your children about the disease and reassure them that their feelings are normal. Set visits at regular intervals because dementia builds gradually and if too much time passes between

visits, a child may witness far more dramatic changes in a loved one's behavior. You may adjust the periodicity of your visits as a person falls into greater decline or because of a doctor's recommendation.

As the disease progresses, define activities that are appropriate for your loved one's declining abilities and your child's increased abilities that the family can do together. Look for ways to help a child make positive memories out of the present moments.

Remember to give yourself permission to prioritize your children's needs . . . and to make time for your own. Your loved one will be better cared for if you, your children, and your family are thriving.

A simple visit from you and your child will have a lingering positive effect on your loved one's happiness even though she may quickly forget you came. Talk to your children after the visit, discuss what may have transpired. Ask if they have any questions and explain why your loved one might have become upset or confused during the visit.

Explain to them that by simply being there you show Grandpa that you care, regardless of his cognitive level. Remember to let your child know that as a loved one's brain changes, he may forget many things, but he will still be able to feel your child's presence, kindness, and love.