

Talking With Children About Alzheimer's Disease

When a family member is diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease everyone in the family is affected, including children and grandchildren. Children see parents' uncertainty, feel their sadness, hear their frustration. Children may wonder if they have caused this stress. Children may worry how they now fit into family's changing needs and priorities.

Helping children understand what is happening provides reassurance and direction. Begin with educating yourself so you can answer children's questions honestly in age-appropriate ways. Storybooks can also be effective in providing information, encouraging questions and opening up conversations about feelings and concerns.

Pre-school age children

Small children are primarily interested in what is going on at the moment. Simple explanations are usually enough. *Grandma is having problems with her memory.* Expect to repeat explanations as small children often forget. One resource to consider is

- Striped Shirts and Flowered Pants: A Story About Alzheimer's Disease for Young Children by B. Schnurbush (ages 4-8)

School-age children

As children come to a greater understanding of the concept of illness, they look for more explanation. Put a name to the illness. *Alzheimer's is a disease that causes the brain to change. Grandpa's 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's the Alzheimer's. You are not to blame.*

- What's Happening to Grandpa? by M. Shriver

Teen-age children

A teenager may find it hard to accept how a person is changing. Feelings of embarrassment or discomfort are common. A teen may worry, *Will you get Alzheimer's? Will I?* The reality is, *Alzheimer's is not contagious. Most people do not get Alzheimer's.*

- AFA Teens Available through the Alzheimer's Foundation of America www.afateens.org This website offers support for teens, involvement in Foundation activities and access to information on Alzheimer's disease and ways to cope.

Children of all ages

Talk with children about their feelings. Reassure them that whatever they feel is normal. With children, unexpressed feelings can show as changes in behaviors and attitudes, problems in school or with friends. Watch for signs that a child is upset. A school counselor or social worker can help you help your child to understand what is happening and how to cope.

Find activities that the family can do together or that a child can do with the person living with Alzheimer's disease. Look for ways to help a child make positive memories out of present moments.

Creating positive memories out of present moments

Create a memory box

A memory box is a box filled with things that remind you of your grandpa or grandma. Look through the box together.

A few additional ideas for doing things together

scrape carrots or potatoes
read stories or poetry
talk to grandpa about when he was boy
put a puzzle together
share a favorite snack
toss a ball
blow bubbles

listen to music, sing or dance
draw pictures or color
talk to grandma when she was a girl
water the garden
make instant pudding
play with balloons
hold hands

Parents of all ages

Remember to give yourself permission to prioritize your children's needs . . . and to make time for your own needs. The person you are caring for will be better cared for if you and your children, i.e., your family is thriving.

And remember, the Alzheimer's Resource of Alaska is here to support you through education and services. Don't hesitate to call.