

TO SEPARATING OR WIDOWED PARENTS, GRANDPARENTS AND
EXTENDED FAMILY MEMBERS:

"How do we come together? How do we maintain family togetherness despite differences and wounds? First, we must decide that we want to overcome the obstacles. We must be steadfast in our determination to hold the family together no matter its shape. When there are children there is no such thing as total divorce. The children make it necessary and desirable for the divorcing couple and their families to have lifelong relationships."

*Dr. Lillian Carson, The Essential Grandparent's Guide to Divorce.
Health Communications, Inc.: Deerfield Beach, Florida, 1999. P.57*



When parents separate, or when one of the parents dies, children need their extended families more than ever. The grandparents on both sides of the family and the whole extended families on both sides can be a resource for the parents and children. Sometimes, because of strong feelings about a former partner, parents are tempted to exclude the former "in-laws" from their life and the lives of their children. Sometimes the extended family abandons a parent and their children.

If the children were previously positively connected to all or some members of both families, these relationships need to continue. Otherwise, this can be another loss for the children. It is also important for infant children to have relationships with their relatives. The advantages for keeping these relationships are:

SELF-ESTEEM

- Self-esteem is a measure of how much a child or adult likes the person they see themselves as. We get our sense of self partly from how others, especially those closest, see us. During a separation or divorce, or after a death, children may question who they are and whether or not they are loveable and valuable human beings. They may blame themselves for the loss. They may believe that it was their fault or that they caused it by not being "good enough".
- Parents, grandparents and extended family members can reassure children that they are loveable and worth loving. Some ways of giving children this message are: continuing to include them in family events, encouraging and facilitating communication - in person, by mail, email, or phone; and assuring them that the separation has not changed anything about how family members continue to love and value the children.

STABILITY

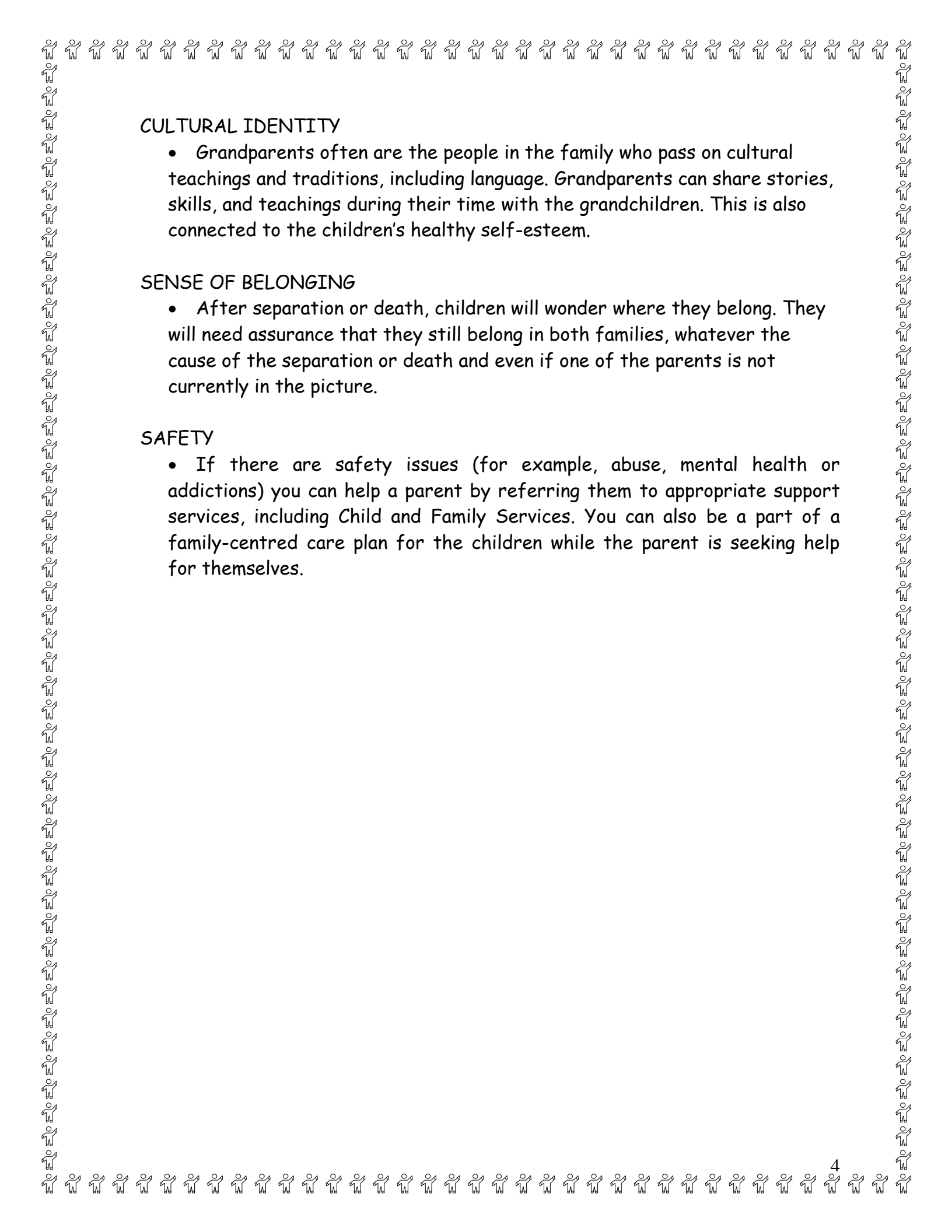
- Parents are separated or divorced, not the children or grandparents or extended family. If the extended family members were important to the children before the separation, they will be important after too. Even if the children are very young, members of the extended family can provide

stability and continuity in the children's lives. For example, if the family always gathered at Grandma's house for Sunday dinners, the children still can at times (even without one of the parents). They might also go every second week, depending on time - sharing arrangements.

- If both parents are changing houses, or the remaining parent is moving, it can be very comforting for the children to go to their aunt and uncle's house, where the children feel comfortable and have always gone.
- Summer holidays can still include a visit to the traditional fishing camp or cottage with the extended family, whomever that might include. It may not be possible for both parents to share this time with the children and extended family, but it may be alternated on an annual basis. It may make more sense for this specific activity to involve only one parent.

HEALTH AND WELL-BEING:

Physical	Extended family members can help by providing nourishing meals, treats and recreational opportunities. They can give the parent or parents a break!
Mental	Extended family can help with homework, read to the children, and take the children to the library.
Emotional	Grandparents and extended family can provide opportunities for children to cry on their shoulders, get hugs, and share a happy story about a former partner that their parent may not be able to handle. When a parent has died, the extended family can help the children grieve and provide space for the remaining parent to grieve by themselves.
Spiritual	The extended family can take the children to church, temple, or synagogue, to ceremonies, to whatever spiritual practice might fit for your family. They can teach them about spiritual values, spending time in nature, sharing music and art.



CULTURAL IDENTITY

- Grandparents often are the people in the family who pass on cultural teachings and traditions, including language. Grandparents can share stories, skills, and teachings during their time with the grandchildren. This is also connected to the children's healthy self-esteem.

SENSE OF BELONGING

- After separation or death, children will wonder where they belong. They will need assurance that they still belong in both families, whatever the cause of the separation or death and even if one of the parents is not currently in the picture.

SAFETY

- If there are safety issues (for example, abuse, mental health or addictions) you can help a parent by referring them to appropriate support services, including Child and Family Services. You can also be a part of a family-centred care plan for the children while the parent is seeking help for themselves.



Parents

You can help the extended family and grandparents by:

Respecting the grandparents' and extended family members' roles and making it as easy as possible for them to stay involved.

Asking for help without strings attached.

Letting them know what you need and what the children need.

Listen to them without judgment or blame.

Respect their grieving process. This means allowing them to be angry, sad, in denial - wherever they are at without pushing them to be "over it".

Not asking them to take sides.

Grandparents and Extended Family Members

You can help the parents by:

Respecting their role as decision-makers regarding their children and not telling them what they should do.

Offering help without strings attached.

Asking them what they need and doing what you can to provide what is needed.

Listening to them without judgment or blame for either parent.

Respecting their grieving process. This means allowing them to be angry, sad, in denial - wherever they are at without pushing them to be "over it".

Not taking sides.