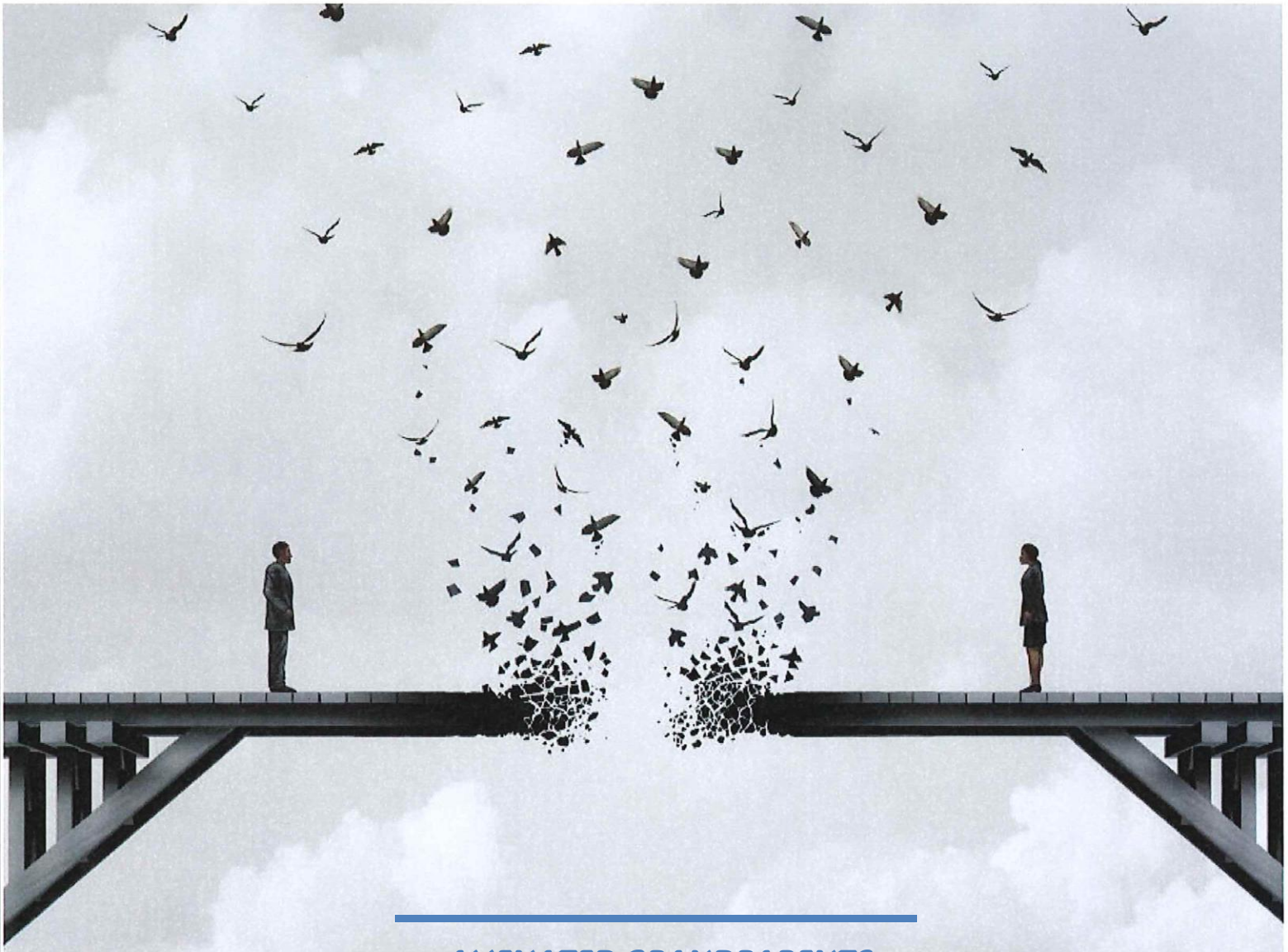


ALIENATED GRANDPARENTS

Facts About Alienated Grandparents:

1. Grandparent alienation is more common than often acknowledged. Studies estimate that 10–20% of grandparents are estranged from at least one set of grandchildren, often due to family conflict, divorce, or remarriage.
2. **Causes of Alienation:**
    - **Divorce or separation**, where the custodial parent restricts access.
    - **Family disputes**, including disagreements with their own children or in-laws.
    - **Parental gatekeeping**, especially if the grandparent is perceived as critical or interfering.
    - **Estrangement from their own child**, which then results in losing contact with grandchildren.
    - **Protective actions**, in cases where grandparents reported concerns (e.g., about child safety), leading to punitive cut-off.
3. **Psychological Impact:**
    - Grief and **ambiguous loss**, as the child is still alive but unavailable.
    - **Chronic sadness**, guilt, depression, and social isolation.
    - Grandparents often struggle with feelings of powerlessness and injustice.
4. **Legal Limitations:**
    - In Australia and many other jurisdictions, **grandparents do not have automatic legal rights** to visitation. While the Family Law Act recognises their importance, access is not guaranteed.
    - Legal action is often costly, emotionally exhausting, and can worsen family relationships.

Alienated Grandparents Guide:

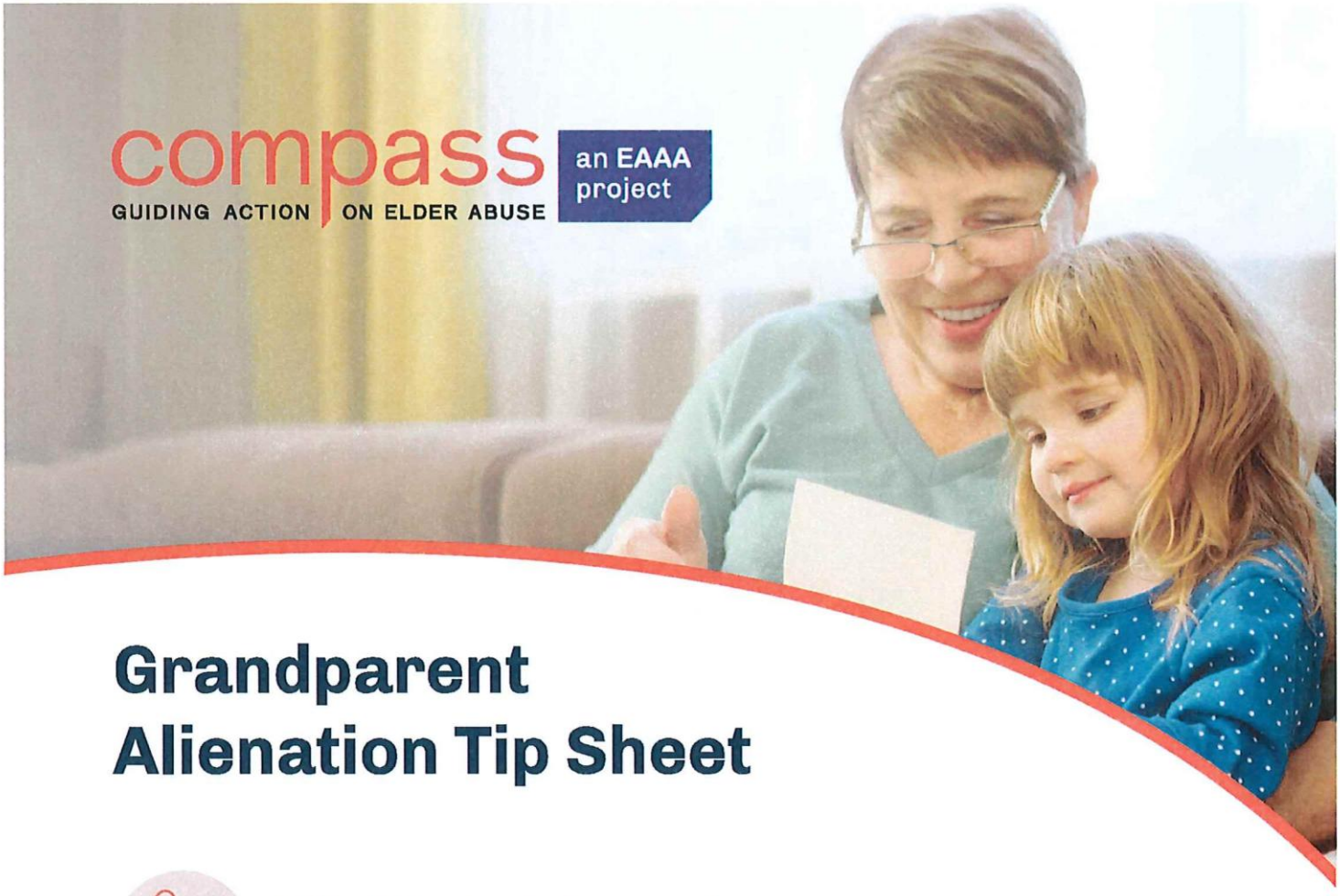
Supporting alienated grandparents is deeply important but it's also incredibly sensitive work. Grandcarers SA understands that when grandparents are cut off from their grandchildren it's not just a loss, it's an ongoing, living grief.

We also understand that the support needed by alienated grandparents is individual and personal, requiring the care and professional input of qualified personnel beyond the resources of Grandcarers SA.

Grandcarers SA encourages alienated grandparents to seek out support professionals such as Counsellors and legal specialists, beginning with the mediation process.

To assist Alienated Grandparents through this process, Grandcarers SA has published this Guide and Tip Sheet, which includes details of other agencies who may be able to help those who are alienated from their grandchildren.

compass
GUIDING ACTION ON ELDER ABUSE
an EAAA project



Grandparent Alienation Tip Sheet

What is grandparent alienation?

Grandparent alienation is a type of elder abuse, a term for the mistreatment of older people in a society. It occurs when grandparents are unreasonably denied meaningful opportunities to have a relationship and spend time with their grandchildren. It can vary from not being invited to a birthday party right through to no contact with the grandchild at all over a protracted period of time.

Grandparent alienation often involves grandparents being stopped from having contact with their grandchildren. However, it can manifest in different ways, such as:

- **Withholding, or threatening to withhold, contact with the grandchildren unless** the grandparents agree to provide financial or other support in exchange—for example, you can only see the grandchildren if you pay their school fees or provide childminding (financial and psychological abuse like this is known as 'coercive control')
- **Limiting grandparents' access to the children** to times that suit only the parent(s)
- **Allowing only fleeting contact with the grandchildren** when they are with the non-custodial parent after a family separation
- **Not including contact with grandparents** and other significant family members in parental contact arrangements under children's court orders (without this, the children ultimately lose their sense of connection to their wider family)
- **Emotional blackmailing**—making statements like, 'if you really loved your grandchildren, you would recognise that we need the family home more and find somewhere else to live'
- **Saying negative things** about the grandparents to (or in front of) the children
- **Bullying the grandparents into making a succession plan that the parents want** by threatening that they won't see the children again if they don't agree
- Parents with **'inheritance impatience'** blocking contact between children and grandparents to try to get their inheritance sooner.

Why does grandparent alienation happen?

There are many factors and causes ('drivers'). In extreme cases, it can arise from the children's parent(s) having their own personal challenges, such as poor mental health, substance abuse, or even criminal convictions for child abuse behaviours. When assisting with cases of grandparent alienation, support practitioners are required to conduct risk assessments, and these will take note of such drivers to help determine how and what interventions will be appropriate.

Other drivers include **unresolved trauma or conflict** between the family generations, resulting in the children's parents acting in a way that they believe is protective of the children or wanting to 'punish' the grandparents. Unfortunately, the grandchildren suffer the consequences.

Here are examples of unresolved trauma/conflict drivers contributing to grandparent alienation:

- Grandparents turn up to the children's school events, but the parent becomes aggressive and tells them to stay away because 'You never bothered to attend my school events, so why attend your grandchild's?'
- A parent lacks trust in the grandparents because of their own feelings of being let down when they experienced abuse in childhood, so they believe that it's best to keep the grandparents at a distance to protect the children.
- Adult sibling rivalry leads to accusations such as 'You spend more time with their children than with mine!'
- Relationship stresses and breakdowns develop when, because of the COVID pandemic, the parents and children move back in with the grandparents.

Sometimes, **differences in individual understandings of what a 'family'** is cause conflicts that contribute to grandparent alienation. The misunderstandings could be situations like:

- **Expectations of the grandparent's role** in the family differing, perhaps for cultural or religious reasons—the conflict first arises between the parents and eventually extends to the grandparents, until the relationships break down
- Grandparents having the best of intentions and wanting to support the children's parents, but the parents **having other ideas** on what, how and when this support should be provided and determined
- Grandparents losing contact with the children following **parental separation**, because the primary carer parent moves away and/or doesn't value their former in-laws' role as grandparents
- Blended families experiencing **a sense of competition** between biological and non-biological grandparents.

Whatever the reasons for the alienation, the effects can be catastrophic on a family, particularly on the affected grandparents.

How can family roles be so unclear?

Ideas about the meaning of 'family' began to change following the years of mass migration to Australia in the 1960s and 1970s.

- Previously, in many traditional societies, raising children was regarded as a **community responsibility**—a similar concept to today's idea that 'it takes a village to raise a child'.
- The traditional sense of 'family' was one of **extended family**. Often, 3 generations lived in the same household.
- They also often had aunties **living next door** and lots of close family friends who were called 'aunty' and 'uncle'.

However, as these wide sources of involvement and support were left behind, the concept of a family eventually shifted.

- A **'nuclear' family structure** of father, mother, and siblings became more common. There was no extended family in the household and no extra aunties and uncles to share responsibility.
- While, in time, one-parent and same-sex parent families also became common, they also generally **lacked the extended family** network.

Gradually the idea that parents, rather than a community or extended family, were solely responsible for the children became established, as a result, parents now expect to govern the contacts their children can have.

How does alienation affect grandparents?

It can leave grandparents isolated, anxious, depressed, angry and frustrated. In effect, they are grieving for the living. This can also be called ambiguous grief.

Grandparents can in turn become isolated from their peers as they retreat from conversations about their friends' grandchildren, or indeed are not included by friends as they know it is upsetting if they talk about their positive relationships.

If it results in a face-to-face confrontation, they can be physically abused.

If they feel forced into making certain decisions to prevent the alienation escalating, it can result in unpaid loans, giving away substantial sums of money and putting up with untenable co-living arrangements.

In some situations where the grandparent is forced to make a court application, it can result in long term fracturing of family relationships.

How common is grandparent alienation? Is it on the rise?

It's difficult to measure, because it's not a topic many grandparents talk about.

- Sometimes they aren't **willing or comfortable** to discuss their situation with others.
- Often, feelings of **shame and guilt** associated with a family separation make it hard to speak up.
- Even though they 'suffer in silence', alienated grandparents **grieve the loss** of their family unit, their grandchildren, and the opportunity to spend time with them and see them grow and develop.

Ultimately, grandparents simply want the opportunity to develop and maintain loving relationships with their grandchildren. They want to support them and be involved in their lives.

Where can alienated grandparents get professional help?

Under the *Family Law Act 1975*, which is focused on the child's best interests, children have the right to develop and maintain meaningful relationships with their parents, grandparents and other adults, if it is safe for them to do so. However, when this is not happening, children are generally unable to do anything about it and it may fall to the grandparents to act.

- Grandparents cannot apply for parenting orders without having attempted **mediation**, and to do this they can engage with Family Dispute Resolution (FDR) practitioners or the federally funded Family Relationship Centres. However, FDR costs money and the centres often have long waiting lists, so this is not always a quick and affordable option.
- If mediation (once attempted) is unsuccessful, the FDR practitioner can issue a certificate enabling the grandparents to take the matter to court. However, going to **court** is an expensive process with no guarantee of achieving the outcome the grandparents want.
- In addition, grandparents are often reluctant to take the matter to court for fear of **irreparable damage** to the relationship with the children's parent(s).

A better option is **elder mediation**. This is an intervention strategy for elder abuse (which includes grandparent alienation), and it's available in trial sites across Australia as well as private mediation practices.

- Elder mediation enables the practitioner to work with the family in a more **therapeutic and personal** way than legal avenues do.
- Elder mediation provides time to **establish trust** between the family members.
- With a focus on the children's best interests, elder mediation tries to find the drivers of grandparent alienation in a particular case, work out what has happened, identify the effects on all family members, and **determine a path forward** that everyone agrees to.
- While elder mediation can't result in a legally binding agreement, it does help to **resolve the underlying factors** contributing to grandparent alienation and improves the relationships between parents, grandparents and grandchildren.

By working with the causes, elder mediation can provide a practical, effective solution to grandparent alienation.

What can grandparents do to resolve alienation themselves?

- Call the Australian Government's **Family Relationship Advice Line** (1800 050 321) for general advice and referrals.
- If there is an **Elder Abuse trial site** located nearby, contact them to find out how elder mediation might be able to help. For locations, contact Relationships Australia by visiting their website (www.relationships.org.au) or calling 1300 364 277.
- Contact a **Family Relationship Centre** to initiate a mediation process. Find a centre by calling the Family Relationship Advice Line (1800 050 321) or visiting the Family Relationships Online website (www.familyrelationships.gov.au/talk-someone/centres).
- Try to talk with the children's parents, if it's at all possible. Be open, honest, and willing to listen to the parents' side of the story. But also be prepared to say what has happened and how it has affected both you and the grandchildren. Look for middle ground and seek realistic steps back to the grandparent role, such as occasional scheduled visits.
- Take time to **reflect on how your own behaviour** may have contributed to the current situation, and be prepared to listen to the parents' point of view.
- If you're able to, **maintain contact with the grandchildren** via social media and keep sending birthday gifts with notes. Avoid criticising the parents or discussing the adults' conflict with the grandchildren—doing so can make things worse.
- It can be very difficult if you are unable to find, or don't know, where the grandchild(ren) live or what their living arrangements are. If this is the case, we strongly encourage you to **contact a professional counsellor** to help you manage the intense grief and loss that may arise in these circumstances.
- If the grandchildren's parents are separating, **discuss** with them how the grandparent relationship will continue. If one parent is seeking a parenting agreement, encourage them to consider including arrangements for the children to spend time with their grandparents.
- Similarly, if a new grandchild is about to arrive, discuss with the parents how they see your role as grandparent. **Make no assumptions**: ask what their expectations are for care provision, discipline, shared holidays, birthday celebrations, religious beliefs. Suggest setting up trial arrangements at first.
- **Take the higher road**—let the parents and the grandchildren know you love them, regardless of the conflict.
- Remember to **nurture your relationship** with your own partner. Too often, the grandparent alienation issues take over all aspects of your life and your own primary relationship may suffer.
- Above all, no matter what you try, always remember to ask yourself, 'How is my behaviour/this situation impacting the children?' **Model the family communications and relationships** that you want your grandchildren to emulate in their own lives.

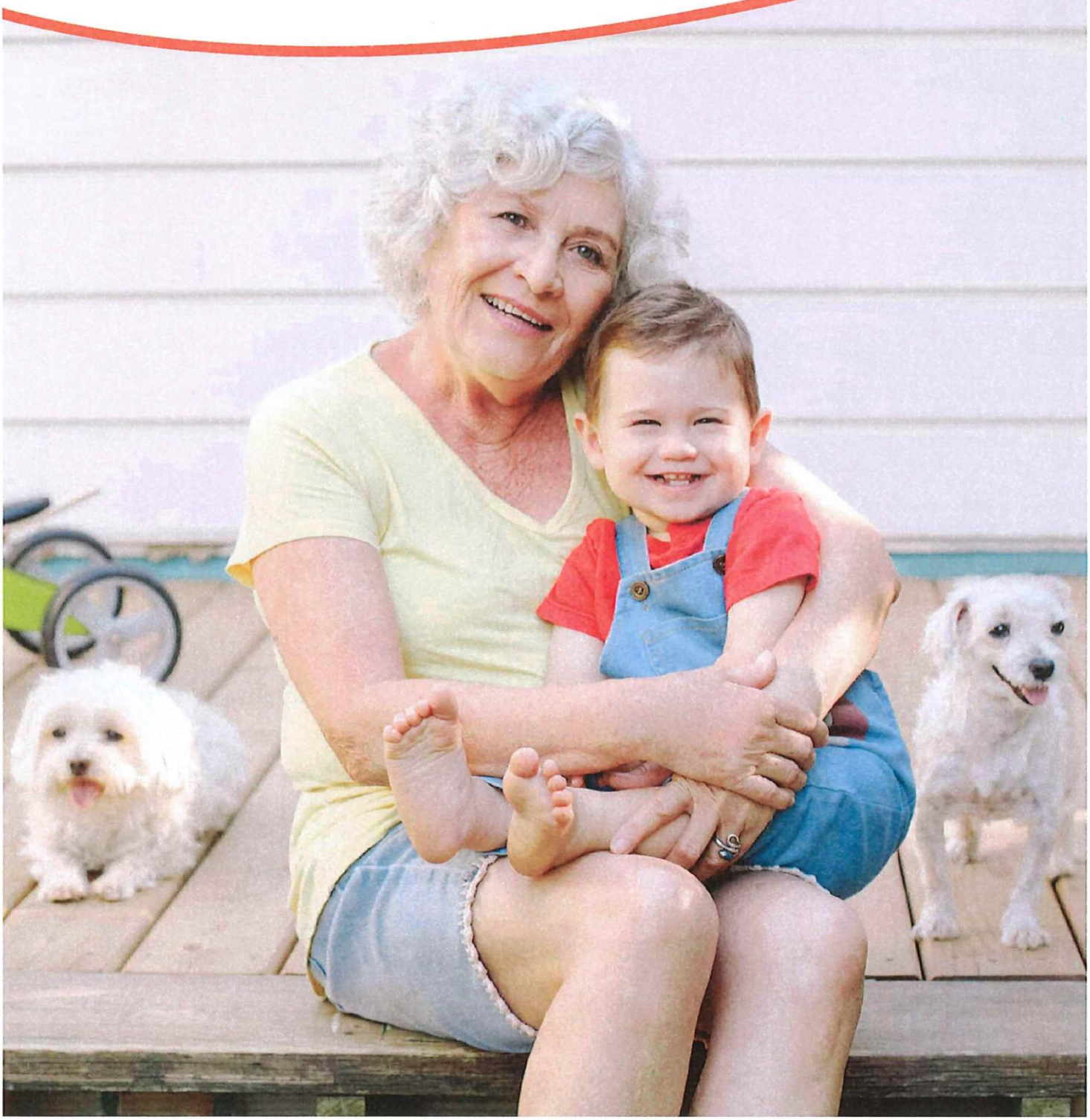
Additional Resources

Visit the Grandparent Alienation page on Compass for more information

https://compass.info/grandparent-alienation-webinar

Watch the Grandparent Alienation Webinar

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1AkrA7gIfIU



GRIEFLINE

Griefline is a national not-for-profit organisation that supports anyone experiencing grief. Griefline provides a compassionate space for people to explore and express their grief without judgement. Griefline's services are accredited under the National Safety and Quality Digital Mental Health Standards, underscoring their commitment to delivering person-centred, high-quality, and effective care.

Griefline is an information partner of healthdirect Australia.

Call the helpline **1300 845 745** 8am to 8pm, 7 days a week, 365 days a year AEDT/AEST. Online moderated forums, and grief and loss resources are available 24/7.

Organisation:
Griefline
Telephone:
1300 845 745
Website:
Grief Line

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beyondblue
the national depression initiative
www.beyondblue.org.au

Talk or chat online to a counsellor

If you're going through a hard time right now, the Beyond Blue Support Service is available 24/7 for brief counselling.

Our counsellors will listen and help you find the extra mental health help you need.

Get free, confidential counselling

Call a counsellor on 1300 22 4636Chat to a counsellor online

Accessibility and language support are available for telephone counselling.

If you don't need to talk to a counsellor right now, but you have a question about mental health resources, you can **email our Beyond Blue Support Service**. We'll reply to you within 24 hours.

https://www.beyondblue.org.au/