

How to keep children's special bond with grandparents when Alzheimer's strikes

Remember Me/Forget You Not: These two groundbreaking programs for children and teens teach them what's going on when grandparents with dementia start changing.

By Sharon Oosthoek

Lucas was just six when his mother found him crying on the couch after a weekend visit to his grandparents. Cathi Gorham-Mol asked her son what was wrong and his answer brought tears to her eyes too.

"He said, 'Grandpa doesn't love me anymore. He didn't give me a hug goodbye,'" recalls Gorham-Mol.

"He was just devastated. I told him it isn't your grandpa who forgot to give you a hug. It's the Alzheimer's disease. He felt a bit better, but he was so hurt his grandpa wasn't going to be the same."



Innovative programs for children about dementia

The Woodstock elementary school teacher had been attending a support group at the [Alzheimer Society of Oxford](#) when the Executive Director, Shelley Green, approached her about creating a similar program for children. Gorham-Mol agreed.

"Kids are always the last to be told, the last to be involved," she says. They're scared because they don't understand. The only way to help them is to educate them," she says.

Gorham-Mol and Green created ***Remember Me***, a program that combines playful lessons with practical activities for children aged seven to 12. It was the first program of its kind in Canada. Another program for teens, called ***Forget You Not***, was also created. The programs proved so successful that 14 years later, they're available at Alzheimer Societies in communities across Canada.

Education is the key

Children and teens learn not only about how the disease affects the brain, but how it affects the entire family. "We help give them perspective, telling them about the responsibility and pressures facing their Mom and Dad, and letting them know this disease affects everyone in the family," says Gorham-Mol.

Memories are made of this

Gorham-Mol feels particularly good about something called the Memory Box, which she encourages children to create for their grandparents.

Children can put things in it that speak to their grandparents. Her son Lucas put a toy airplane in his because he knew his grandfather used to fly. He also put in a package of bird seed because his grandfather liked to feed birds.

Gorham-Mol remembers clearly the day Lucas first shared the box with his grandfather, who had not been able to communicate for three months. His grandfather suddenly began to talk, taking them all by surprise. There was not a dry eye in the house, says Gorham-Mol.

"His grandpa had that box until it was past the point where it meant anything to him," says Gorham-Mol.

Lucas, who is now 19, took it back after that. He still has it.

Reaching out for help

[Your local Alzheimer Society](#) can guide you and your family through the progression of the disease with support groups and other practical services.

Sharon Oosthoek is a Toronto-based freelance writer.

Photo (above) Cathi Gorham-Mol (left) and Shelley Green, Executive Director, Alzheimer Society of Oxford and kids.