

Children's Developmental Understanding of Death and Dying

0-2 (Infant) Children at this age have no understanding of death. However they are old enough to be affected by grief. Disruptions in their normal routine or relationship patterns can be difficult. Their reaction to grief may become apparent in their eating or sleeping habits, or by acting out and being extra fussy or clingy. They may also experience regressive behaviors meaning they are unable to do things that they once had mastered. (ie drinking from a bottle again instead of a cup, wetting their pants but already potty trained.)

2-6 (Preschool) Preschool age children view death as temporary and reversible. They interpret their world in an exact and concrete manner. They ask many questions that are matter of fact. They may believe that death can be caused magical explanations and people coming to take them away. (ie. Boogy man, ghosts, angels.) Often times they may blame themselves for the death or feel as though they did something wrong.

6-8 (School Age) Children at this age understand that death is irreversible but may not believe that it is common or that it could happen to them. Expression of anger toward the person who died or toward the people that could not save the person may occur. Sometimes the child may seem overly sad or withdrawn, sometimes they may have trouble sleeping, eating, as well as having stomach aches and headaches. The child may have fears about death and concerns of the safety of their loved ones.

8-12 (Pre-Adolescent) Children at this age have a level of understanding similar to adults. That death is final, irreversible, and very common. They are able to understand the reason that the person died whether due to an illness, accident, or traumatic event. They also may tend to be overly sad, withdrawn, have sleeping difficulties, eating difficulties and fears of something happening to their loved ones. They have a tendency to hide their feelings because they feel different or because they don't want to worry parents. They don't want to be different from anyone else.

12-18 (Adolescent) Adolescents have an adult understanding of death. They are developing the ability to think abstractly and are many times curious about what it means to die. They often reject adult rituals and support, and they feel as if no one understands them or what they are going through. They may have strong emotional reactions but have difficulty expressing these feelings verbally so they tend to act out or change their normal behavior.

Helping Your Grieving Child

1. Express interest in the child's day; find out what they are doing, how they are doing, and what they are thinking. This will help you better understand where they are in the grieving process and what their beliefs and views are.
2. Work to keep things as normal as possible. Routines are helpful for children because it reassures them that their world is not going to change.
3. Welcome all questions, but don't force discussions. Make sure you understand the real question before answering; take your time to think about how you are going to answer.
4. Talk with the child's teacher or guidance counselor to alert them of the situation. Ask the teacher to let the parent know if the child seems worried or if their behavior changes.
5. Let them know that its ok to feel their feelings and to talk about how they are feeling.
6. When in doubt, seek professional help from pediatricians, mental health professionals, and others specializing in bereavement.

Common Grief Symptoms

Emotional

Anger
Anxiety
Insecurity
Fears
Lack of Feelings
Sadness
Depression
Rage
Loneliness
Denial
Mood Swings

Physical

Stomachaches
Headaches
Fatigue
Appetite Changes
Sleep Disturbances

Behavioral

Trouble in School
Acting "Too Good"
Regression-
(bedwetting, thumb sucking)
Clingy
Aggression
Irritability

Psychological

Concentration Difficulties
Low Self-esteem
Forgetfulness
Confusion
Guilt Feelings

Social

Increased conflict with others
Withdrawal

Spiritual

Questions about faith, meaning, or the afterlife