

How Children View Death

A child's understanding of death and response to grief depends on many factors, including age, personality, level of maturity, previous experience with death, relationship to the person who died, and family background (involving values, beliefs, family communication, and support). Like an adult, each child reacts in his or her own way. The better you know about the individual child, the better you will be able to understand and respond to his or her needs.

Pre-k to Kindergarten

Children at this level may

- see death as reversible, not final, and may expect the dead person to return
- see death as accidental or incidental, not as something that happens to everyone
- believe that his or her actions were responsible for the death, and may connect unrelated events (Grandma died because I wouldn't eat my vegetables.)
- think of death as living in another place (What do dead people eat? Do they watch TV?)
- engage in wish fulfillment (If I wish hard enough, Uncle Joe will come back.)

Children of this age may react by

- showing anxiety about the possibility of their own death and the death of family members
- ask when the dead person will return
- responding intermittently to grief with brief strong reaction and then returning to normal activity, such as play, as a way of reducing stress
- being confused or upset by the disruption in normal family routine and the grief of close family members and others
- having normal fears heightened (such as fear of dark, of new places, of going to sleep), and perhaps regressing to thumb-sucking or bed-wetting
- crying easily or becoming angry about things that don't usually cause tears or anger

Grades One to Three

Children at this level may

- begin to understand that death is final and irreversible, but may see death as happening only to some people, not to everyone
- personify death as someone or something (the bogeyman, a ghost) that sneaks up on people and takes them away
- fear that death is contagious, something you catch like a cold
- see themselves as responsible (I told Tommy that I wished he were dead, and two weeks later he died.)
- be confused by words (*He's gone on a long journey* may be interpreted by a child to mean that the dead person has gone on a business trip or a vacation.)

Children of this age may react by

- being fearful of going to sleep or being separated from close family members
- showing physical symptoms such as fatigue or loss of appetite
- trying to hide grief so as not to upset family
- asking for detailed explanations of why and how
- engaging in symbolic play, such as playing "death," "burial," or "funeral"

Grades Four to Six

Children of this age may

- understand that death is final and irreversible and begin to understand that it happens to everyone
- have a heightened sense of fragility and vulnerability and a fear of bodily harm
- think that death is punishment for bad behavior
- feel guilty about their own thoughts (such as guilt about being reluctant to visit a dying grandparent instead of going to a birthday party)
- show strong interest and curiosity about the physical and biological details of death, as well as curiosity about funerals, caskets, and burial
- show concern about relationships (Who will take care of Grandma now that Grandpa is dead?) and lifestyle changes (Will we have enough money to live on without Dad? Will we have to move to a smaller house?)

Children of this age may react by

- having difficulty concentrating on schoolwork and enjoying activities that are usually pleasurable
- becoming withdrawn and isolated or angry and aggressive
- trying to hide feelings to protect family members or because they can't express feelings in ways they think others will understand
- showing concern for "correct" behavior (How should I act? What should I do? Is it OK to cry?)

Grades Six and Up

Children/Teens of this age may

- have reached an adult understanding of death
- have very intense emotions
- spend a lot of time thinking about death and trying to understand what happens after death
- may have more intense grief than any other age group, although may refrain from expressing it

Children/Teens of this age may react by

- becoming detached
- experiencing guilt or shame
- becoming self-conscious about their fears or sense of vulnerability
- being afraid of being labeled abnormal
- demonstrating post-traumatic acting out behavior, (e.g., drug use, delinquent behavior, sexual acting out)
- having abrupt shifts in interpersonal relationships
- having a premature entrance into adulthood (e.g., leaving school or getting married) or reluctance to leave home

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