

# Developmental Differences in Understanding & Reacting to Death

## Infant to 2 Years Old

Understanding of Death	Reactions to Death	Ways to Help
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do not understand nature or permanence of death - expect person to return</li> <li>Experience death as separation - their special person is gone, and their world is different</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May seem unaffected</li> <li>Searching for person who died</li> <li>Pushing away from caregivers or clinging to strangers</li> <li>General distress, trouble eating or sleeping</li> <li>Increased crying, difficulty self-soothing or being comforted</li> <li>Restlessness, irritability, or tantrums</li> <li>Clinginess, separation anxiety</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Avoid confusing terms for death like "resting", "sleeping", or "went away" that might lead to fears of sleep or separation</li> <li>Gently help toddler understand that person cannot return and that their body no longer works</li> </ul>

## 3 to 5 Years Old

Understanding of Death	Reactions to Death	Ways to Help
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Typically have a limited and concrete understanding of death</li> <li>May believe person can still breathe and be hungry or cold when buried</li> <li>Believe wishes come true ("magical thinking")</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May seem fine sometimes and have difficulty self-soothing or being comforted at other times</li> <li>Pushing away caregivers or clinging to strangers</li> <li>Frequently asks questions about death</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use simple, honest language to explain death (causes of death, body stops working, cannot come back, etc.), repeat as often as child requests</li> <li>Model and explain expressions of grief</li> </ul>

Understanding of Death	Reactions to Death	Ways to Help
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often believes person could come back to life</li> <li>• May believe death was a punishment or their fault</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confusion and increased fears or worry</li> <li>• Trouble sleeping or nightmares</li> <li>• Physical complaints (stomachaches, trouble eating)</li> <li>• Restlessness, irritability, or tantrums</li> <li>• Clinginess, separation fears</li> <li>• Worries about self or others dying</li> <li>• Acting younger than normal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid confusing terms like “rest in peace” or “went away” that might lead to fears of sleep or separation</li> <li>• Provide opportunities to express their grief through play and art</li> </ul>

## 6 to 9 Years Old

Understanding of Death	Reactions to Death	Ways to Help
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Depending on life experiences and education, might fully understand what death means</li> <li>• Usually by age 7, they can understand that death is permanent and the person cannot return</li> <li>• Often worry their own thoughts or actions caused the death</li> <li>• May believe death is like a person or ghost who comes to get you</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initial denial or disbelief</li> <li>• Many questions, confusions, and fears about death</li> <li>• General distress often comes out as anger, irritability, or fighting</li> <li>• Physical aches and pains</li> <li>• Trouble with schoolwork or perfectionism</li> <li>• Attempts to conform with peers may look like “nothing is wrong”</li> <li>• Insecurities, anxiety</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer accurate information when child expresses confusion about death</li> <li>• Model and invite expression of feelings and thoughts</li> <li>• Provide physical outlets (sports, play)</li> </ul>

## 10 to 12 Years Old

Understanding of Death	Reactions to Death	Ways to Help
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fully understands what “dead” means and that death is universal (everyone dies) and irreversible (they cannot come back to life)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Initial shock or denial</li> <li>Anxiety, fears, anger, irritability</li> <li>Aggression to avoid feeling helplessness</li> <li>Distrust or fear of being abandoned</li> <li>May seem self-centered or callous</li> <li>Curiosity or fascination with death</li> <li>Attempts to conform with peers (i.e. “nothing is wrong”, don’t want to be “different”)</li> <li>Insecurities, feelings of shame or embarrassment</li> <li>Feeling guilty or remorseful for past actions with the deceased</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Without pressuring youth to talk, make space to listen and answer questions honestly</li> <li>Model and invite expression of feelings and thoughts</li> <li>Provide reassurance of safety and future security</li> <li>Offer physical proximity and comfort</li> <li>Provide physical outlets (sports, running, play)</li> <li>May be more likely to talk to peers, peer support groups can be helpful</li> </ul>

## 13 Years Old or Older

Understanding of Death	Reactions to Death	Ways to Help
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have a full adult understanding of death</li> <li>May have ability to think abstractly and process spiritual issues and meaning in life</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Feeling guilty or remorseful for past actions with the deceased</li> <li>Feelings of shame or embarrassment</li> <li>Sadness, tearfulness, depression</li> <li>Anger (at self, deceased, parents/caregivers, God, etc.)</li> <li>Irritability, frustration</li> <li>Distrust or fear of being abandoned</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Without pressuring youth to talk, make space to listen and answer questions honestly</li> <li>Model and invite expression of feelings and thoughts</li> <li>Share books, encourage journaling, drawing, etc.</li> <li>Avoid putting adult responsibilities or pressure on teens</li> </ul>

Understanding of Death	Reactions to Death	Ways to Help
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Curiosity or fascination with death</li> <li>• Attempts to conform with peers may look like “nothing is wrong”</li> <li>• Insecurities</li> <li>• Non-compliance, acting out, risky behaviors</li> <li>• Trouble sleeping or oversleeping, fatigue</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May be more likely to talk with peers and people outside of family; peer support groups can be helpful</li> </ul>

To learn more about the Judi’s House/JAG Institute Training and Education Initiative, which provides additional and customized training and education about developmental differences and other topics related to grief and loss, please visit [judishouse.org/training-education](https://judishouse.org/training-education)

To request a Judi’s House/JAG Institute Training and Education presentation, please visit [judishouse.org/presentation-request](https://judishouse.org/presentation-request)

## References

*Brief Information on Childhood Traumatic Grief (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, [www.nctsn.org](http://www.nctsn.org)), Dougy Center Grief Resources ([www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org)), Grief in Childhood (Pearlman, Schwalbe, & Cloitre, 2010), Helping Bereaved Children (Webb, 2010).*

©2024 Judi’s House/JAG Institute