

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

3 to 5 years old

Understanding of Death	Reactions to Death	Ways to Help
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Typically have a limited and concrete understanding of death. • May believe person can still breathe and be hungry or cold when buried. • Believe wishes come true ("magical thinking"). • Often believe person could come back to life. • May believe death was a punishment or their fault. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May seem fine at times and have difficulty self-soothing or being comforted at other times. • Pushing away caregivers or clinging to strangers. • Frequent asks questions about death. • Confusion and increased fears or worry. • Trouble sleeping or nightmares. • Physical complaints, stomachaches, trouble eating. • Restlessness, irritability, or tantrums. • Clinginess, separation fears. • Worries about self or others dying. • Acting younger than normal. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use simple, honest language to explain death (causes of death, body stops working, cannot come back, etc.); repeat as often as child requests. • Model and explain expressions of grief. • Avoid confusing terms like "rest in peace" or "went away" that might lead to fears of sleep or separation. • Provide opportunities to express their grief through play and art.

6 to 9 years old

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

10 to 12 years old

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

13 years old or older

Understanding of Death	Reactions to Death	Ways to Help
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a full adult understanding of death. • May have ability to think abstractly and process spiritual issues and meaning in life. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has a full adult understanding of death. • May have ability to think abstractly and process spiritual issues and meaning in life. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Without pressuring youth to talk, make space to listen and answer questions honestly. • Model and invite expression of feelings and thoughts. • Share books, encourage journaling, drawing, etc. • Avoid putting adult responsibilities or pressure on teens. • May be more likely to talk with peers; peer support groups can be helpful.

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References

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