

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 eating or sleeping 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 that 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") 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May seem fine sometimes and have difficulty self-soothing or being comforted at other times Pushing away caregivers or clinging to strangers Frequently asks questions about death 	<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

Understanding of Death	Reactions to Death	Ways to Help
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often believes person could come back to life • May believe death was a punishment or their fault 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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"> • 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 the 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 the 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 to 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"> Feeling guilty or remorseful for past actions with the deceased Feelings of shame or embarrassment Sadness, tearfulness, depression Anger (at self, deceased, parents/caregivers, God, etc.) Irritability, frustration Distrust or fear of being abandoned 	<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

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

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

To request a Judi’s House/JAG Institute Training and Education presentation, please visit judishouse.org/presentation-request

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).