

Understanding of Death by Developmental Stages

“If a child is old enough to love, he or she is old enough to grieve.”

Age	Understanding of Death	Typical Grief Responses	Supporting Grief Tips
<p>Infants and toddlers (Baby – Age 3)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is not yet able to cognitively understand death, but do explore states of “nonbeing” through games of peek-a-boo and hide-and-go-seek. • Loss may be understood as an absence particularly of a primary caregiver • Separation from mother causes changes in routines and behaviors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quietness, crankiness, decreased activity, poor sleep, and weight loss. • “I’m upset” behaviors (e.g. crying more, thumb-sucking, biting) • May sleep more or less or eat more or less. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer physical comfort. • Accept the changes while still trying to adhere to some kind of routine. Infants and toddlers are typically comforted by the structure of routines.
<p>Pre-schoolers (Ages-3-6)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Death is like sleeping; it is temporary and not final. • May not understand their, new scary feelings and may not be able to verbalize what is happening inside them. • May believe dead person can come back to life (i.e. like cartoon characters) • Egocentric thinking that they are directly related to the cause of death. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May ask questions about death over and over again (How does she go to the bathroom or How does she eat?). • During play, may reenact death. • Fear of abandonment. • Problems with eating, sleeping, and ladder or bowel control. • Magical thinking (Did I think something or do something that caused the death? Like when I said I hate you and I wish you would die.). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide them with words of some of their feelings: grief, sadness, numb. • Answer questions concretely and lovingly. Be honest. Don’t tell half-truths. “Death” play is fine and helps children integrate the reality of death. Join in and offer your guidance if possible. • Short-term regressive behaviors are normal. • Offer your presence, support, pray with them, and share information about Jesus and Heaven.

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<p>Grade-schoolers (Ages 6-9)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin to understand the finality of death, which is frightening to them. • They usually associated death with old age. • Death accidental rather than inevitable, and is often thought of something that happens to others and not themselves. • This age group tends to personify death (e.g. a spirit, ghost, the bogeyman) and associate it with darkness. • Younger children in this range may tend make superficial associations (e.g. My Grandfather died in the hospital and died; therefore, I will not go to the hospital). • Older children in this range may appear to become morbid or obsessed with death. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Become curious about death and the details of causes of death. • May regress emotionally and behaviorally (e.g. cling to parents, suck thumb, have bathroom accidents, baby talk). • May have exaggerated fears about school. • May demonstrate aggressive behaviors (especially boys). • May express concerns about imaginary illness, or complain more of headaches and stomachaches. • May feel abandoned. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children need permission to concentrate on mourning before they can be expected to forge ahead with the rest of their lives. Give them time. • Allow them to help in some way by creating memory books, choosing pictures for memorial service, making cards, helping with food for bereaved family. • Model grief responses. Do not be afraid to let them see you grieve. Remember, “Jesus wept”. • Offer your presence, support, pray with them, and share information about Jesus and Heaven.

Age	Understanding of Death	Typical Grief Responses	Supporting Grief Tips
<p>Pre-adolescents (Ages 9-12)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Come to understanding that everyone will die including him or her. • Thank of death as final and something that cannot be changed. • Finality of death can engender a great deal of anxiety at this age range. • Tend to try and cover their anxiety by joking about death and making fun of death. • Often show interest in scary stories and like to tell ghost stories. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May hang back socially and scholastically. • May avoid discussions about death. • May demonstrate a nervous reaction by laughing inappropriately or not seeming to have an emotional response that matches the event. • May overact emotionally do to being unsure of how deal with emotions. • Often share details and gossip about events surrounding death. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer constructive “venting” alternatives. Encourage exercise and play activities. • Find support groups that might help them. • Again, model and share own grief responses. • Give as much factual information as possible and discourage rumors or gossip. • Encourage and model appropriate ways to express mourning and grief. Guide them in how to be sensitive to bereaving family members. • Offer your presence, support, pray with them, and share information about Jesus and Heaven.
<p>Adolescents and Beyond</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand death cognitively and grapple with it spiritually. • May continue to deny and repress anxiety about death. • Searching for meaning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May act out because they do not know how else to handle their grief. • Experience a range of emotions from denial to anger. • May feel personally wronged. Express feelings that life is unfair. • May withdraw and prefer to discuss feelings with friends. • May act out a search for meaning. May engage in more risk taking behavior to test own mortality. • May develop a more “existential” response, and perceive long-term planning as futile as death can come at anytime. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acting out behaviors should be tolerated if the teen or others are not being harmed. • Withdrawal is normal in the short-term. (Long-term withdrawal is a sign the teen need extra help.) • Encourage the young person to think about the impact of the event on themselves and others and how they may help others affected as well. • Encourage the search for meaning in ones life. Help them think about spiritual questions but do not impose simplistic answers. Give them your thoughts, but avoid telling them you “understand” what they are experiencing. • Pray with them and share personal loss. Demonstrate to them the heart of Jesus by loving them and acknowledging that the “why” is the most difficult question to answer.