



Children's Grief by Developmental Level

Developmental Level	Concept of Death	Reactions	How to Help
Infancy 0-1yr	Infants do not have any concept of time or the mental capacity to understand serious illness and death.	Concerns are related to meeting basic needs, but they can feel the absence of their loved one.	Infants desire caregiver presence and need routines and rituals.
Toddlers 1-2 yrs	<p>Toddlers have a lack of understanding of the irreversibility and permanence of death and believe that death is temporary and reversible.</p> <p>Most of their understanding is based on caregiver's reactions/emotions and</p>	<p>May regress in previously established behaviors such as: becoming increasingly clingy to parents, sucking thumb, or wanting pacifier, preferring bottle over sippy cup, speech, etc.</p> <p>May ask repetitive questions, such as, "when will mom come home?"</p>	<p>Encourage play in the child's normal environment (such as at home, school, or daycare).</p> <p>Acknowledge and validate feelings. For example, "it is okay to feel sad and cry, I feel sad about mommy dying too."</p> <p>Maintain routines and schedules as much as possible.</p>



	may experience death as prolonged separation.	May display themes of death through play, such as pretending things are dead.	Answer repetitive questions with patience.
Preschoolers 3-5 yrs	<p>Can begin to explore the concept that death is a universal phenomenon, or that everybody will experience death.</p> <p>May still view death as temporary and reversible, or question a dead person's ability to eat, sleep, and stay warm underground.</p>	<p>May regress in some previously established behaviors such as: becoming increasingly clingy to parents, sucking thumb, potty training, speech, etc.</p> <p>May ask repetitive questions, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• When will _____ be home?• Why did _____ die? <p>May display themes of illness/sickness through play, such as pretending a doll has just died or acting out a post death ritual (funerals, ceremonies, feasts).</p>	<p>Encourage play in the child's normal environment (such as at home, school, or daycare).</p> <p>Acknowledge and validate feelings. For example, "it is okay to feel sad and cry, I feel sad about mommy dying too."</p> <p>Maintain routines and schedules as much as possible.</p> <p>Answer repetitive questions with patience.</p> <p>Provide simple but truthful answers to questions.</p> <p>Avoid euphemisms such as "passed away." Instead, use the words</p>



			<p>death, dying, and dead. For example, say, "your mom's heart was not working, and she died."</p> <p>Use words the child already knows and understands, such as, "your dad cannot eat or drink like you can. He cannot breathe air to play and jump like you can."</p>
<p>School-Age 6-12 yrs</p>	<p>Can begin to understand the finality of death by 6-9 years, and understands death is final by 9-12 years.</p> <p>May exhibit a personal fear of death at 9-12 years.</p> <p>Children in this stage may understand physiologic process of dying as their knowledge of the human</p>	<p>May be more emotional or agitated at school or home, which was previously unlike the child.</p> <p>May cope by acting "tough" or being funny.</p> <p>Can feel the desire to act like an adult at times.</p>	<p>Determine what your child already knows by asking open-ended questions and encourage the child to answer their own questions.</p> <p>Be honest when giving details and answering questions. May include providing details about the death, body, and how doctors tried to help.</p> <p>Ask and encourage expression of thoughts, such as, "how are you</p>



	<p>body increases, they may be interested in details of death (ages 9-12 years).</p> <p>Children may also begin to model adult grief behaviors and find support from family members and family practices.</p>		<p>feeling about what you've heard about your mom/dad?"</p> <p>Encourage emotional expression through physical and creative outlets.</p> <p>Consider peer support groups or bereavement/grief camps.</p> <p>Establish family traditions/memorials.</p> <p>Give choices in death and mourning (funeral, family rituals) involvement.</p> <p>If applicable, explain who will help continue to care for the child.</p>
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<p>Adolescents 12-18 yrs</p>	<p>Exhibit a clear understanding regarding the finality of death.</p> <p>Their ability to think about abstract concepts leads to advanced feelings and beliefs about death. A teen's ability to cope is based on prior experience with death.</p> <p>Able to abstractly think about the future without the deceased family member and what that means for their own life.</p> <p>May question spiritual afterlife.</p>	<p>May feel invincible, such as, "it's not going to happen to me/our family."</p> <p>Tend to outwardly express some feelings or emotions but keep others to themselves.</p> <p>May rely more on peers than family support.</p> <p>May appear moody and irritable.</p> <p>May participate in more risk-taking behaviors.</p>	<p>Explore what the teenager knows, does not know and what information they seek.</p> <p>Give information respectfully and sensitively. Teens react not only to what is being said, but also the way it is told.</p> <p>Allow and encourage informed participation in end-of-life process.</p> <p>Encourage creation of family rituals/memories.</p> <p>Encourage peer support, counseling, therapy, or other appropriate outlet measures.</p> <p>Support creative outlets (such as art, music, sports) and help</p>
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			<p>teenager learn importance of self-care.</p> <p>Suggest bereavement or grief camps.</p> <p>Treat teens like young adults and give accurate, appropriate information.</p> <p>Ensure the teen has someone outside the family they can talk to</p>
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