



CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING AND REACTION TO DEATH ACCORDING TO AGE

Children's understanding and reaction to death will depend on their age and their developmental stage. The following are guides only as children will differ in their reactions and grasp of events for a range of reasons other than age alone.

Ages 0 - 2 years

- Infants do not understand the meaning of death
- They may display anxiety when separated from a loved one
- They may appear upset, subdued and uninterested in their surroundings

Ages 2 - 5 years

- No understanding of the permanency of death
- May search for the missing person
- May feel responsible for the death in some way
- May become apathetic and depressed
- May regress to an earlier stage of development e.g. thumb sucking, bedwetting, tantrums or may become clingy
- May develop fears of going to sleep
- May worry that other loved ones may die

How you can help

- ✓ Continuity of normal routine e.g. mealtimes and bedtime
- ✓ Offer physical comfort
- ✓ Explain the death in clear, simple language using words like "dead" and "died" - Do not use terms like "gone to sleep" or "passed away"
- ✓ You may need to repeat the same information again and again
- ✓ Permit them to ask questions and be consistent in your answers
- ✓ Reassure them that they had nothing to do with the death and of the well-being of other family members

Ages 5 - 9 years

- Beginning to realise the permanency of death, but their idea of life after death is still vague
- May have concerns about how the deceased is feeling or what he/she is thinking in the grave
- May have a lot of questions about aspects of the death e.g. how the person died, what they looked like, the funeral, heaven, coffins
- The reaction of their peers is important, they may feel 'different' to them
- Their peers may be awkward about the death and avoid contact
- They may become the target of bullying

How you can help

- ✓ Encourage the child to talk and cry about the deceased if they wish to, otherwise respect their silence
- ✓ Answer questions and provide as much factual information about the death as possible
- ✓ Reassure them that thinking and feeling ceases after death
- ✓ Be vigilant in relation to bullying

Ages 9 - 12 Years

- Understand the finality and universality of death
- Awareness of their own mortality and may worry about their own death
- May display psychosomatic symptoms i.e. physical complaints like tummy aches
- May wish to stay at home close to parents
- May display anger

How you can help

- ✓ Dispel fears about their own health or the health of other loved ones by offering reassurance
- ✓ Encourage them to go to school
- ✓ Allow them to express their anger, offering appropriate ways to do so

Adolescents

- Fully understand the finality, universality and inevitability of death. Their experience of death similar to adults
- May have a range of feelings: guilt, regret, anger, loneliness etc.
- Death adds to the already confused array of emotions experienced by adolescents
- May appear to not care about the death
- May seek support outside of the family

How you can help

- ✓ Offer them time to listen
- ✓ Allow them to express their grief in their own way
- ✓ Be prepared for mood swings
- ✓ Don't feel left out if they seem to value their friends more than their parents

If parents are grieving themselves, they may be emotionally unable to support their other children. In this instance, another supportive adult in the child's life, e.g. other family members, friends, neighbours may need to offer emotional Support.

It should be remembered that for children with special educational needs, their understanding of what has happened will be in line with their developmental age.

WAYS TO HELP YOUR CHILD THROUGH THIS DIFFICULT TIME

Children do not need to be taught how to grieve. They will do it naturally and in healthy ways if we allow them and if we provide a safe atmosphere, permission and example to do so.

- ✓ Listen carefully. Let them tell their story. Tell them that the reactions they are having are normal
- ✓ Pay extra attention, spend extra time with them, be more nurturing and comforting
- ✓ Reassure them that they are safe
- ✓ Don't tell them that they are "lucky it wasn't worse". People are not consoled by such statements. Instead, tell them that you are sorry such an event has occurred and you want to understand and help them

- ✓ Do not be surprised by changes in behaviour or personality. They will return to their usual selves in time
- ✓ Don't take their anger or other feelings personally. Help them to understand the relationship between anger and trauma. Help them find safe ways to express their feelings e.g. by drawing, exercise, or talking
- ✓ Help them to understand that defiance, aggression and risk behaviour is a way to avoid feeling the pain, hurt and or fear they are feeling
- ✓ When going out, let them know where you are going and when you will be back
- ✓ If you are out for a long time telephone and reassure them
- ✓ Tolerate regressive behaviour such as nail biting, thumb sucking, or the need for a night light
- ✓ Share your own experience of being frightened of something and getting through it
- ✓ If they are feeling guilt or shame, emphasise that they did not choose for this to happen and that they are not to blame. Even if they were angry with the person who died, or had been mean to them, this did not make it happen
- ✓ Work with the school support services and other available services

THINGS THAT HELP

1. Grief is a process that takes time.
2. There is no right way to grieve.
3. Being with others sometimes helps. Talk about what happened as this helps to establish that feelings are normal.
4. Sometimes you may want to be alone. That is O.K. too.
5. Getting back to normal routine helps.
6. Get some physical exercise even if you don't feel like it. Even a ten minute walk can help.
7. Avoid alcohol, drugs or sleeping pills as ways of coping.
8. Learn how to physically relax by taking long slow breaths.
9. If you have feelings of guilt make sure you check with a trusted person whether this is rational. It is very easy to feel guilty when we shouldn't.
10. Remember that anger is a natural and healthy part of grief.
11. Grief is a journey that takes a different length of time for each person.
12. Finally, grief is unique to each of us and no two people grieve in exactly the same way. Don't compare your grief to others. Remember this is your grief and you know best how to express it and cope with it.