

A Child's Understanding of Death

A child's ability to understand the concept of death and what it means to him/her varies with the child's age. Adults need to be aware of the level of understanding of the child & adjust explanations to that level.

The most important thing to remember is to be accurate, honest, and as open as possible. Do not give elaborate explanations. Giving a child more than he/she can understand only confuses the child. Encourage questions and assure that any emotions being felt are the same feelings other children in similar situations have felt. Remember, there is no *wrong* way to feel at this time.

The following list can serve as a loose guide to a child's developmental stages, reactions to death, and possible acting out behaviors:

Under two years of age:

Can sense that something is different, that there is a change in the emotional atmosphere.

Does not understand yet what death is

Probably won't remember the person who died

Needs a lot of nonverbal communication (i.e. hugs, rocking, continued routine)

* Acting behaviors include: fussiness, clinginess to adults, regression

Three to five years of age:

Sees death as temporary, believes that the person will return or can be visited

Has difficulty handling concepts such as heaven, the soul or spirit

Feels sadness, but only for a short time and often escapes into play, giving adults the impression the child isn't really grieving

Substitutes attachment to another person in exchange for attachment to person who died

May not remember the person who died

Needs a daily routine, structure, affection, and reassurance

* Acting behaviors include: regression, nightmares, aggression, non-compliance

Five to ten years of age:

Begins to understand that death is final and permanent

Begins to have a fear of death and of others dying

May feel guilt (magical thinking) and blame self for the death

Has difficulty putting problems and feelings into words

Often asks concrete and specific questions about the death, the body, etc.

Identifies strongly with the deceased

* Acting behaviors include: compulsive care giving, aggression, possessiveness, regression, headaches, stomachaches, and phobias

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Ten to eighteen years of age:

Recognizes that death is inevitable and irreversible

May worry or think about own death

Often tries not to think or talk about the recent death

Hides feelings sometimes out of embarrassment or concern for other grieving family members or fear of "looking different" from peers

Sometimes questions religious beliefs

Often angry at the deceased or, if an accident or murder, at other people involved in the death

Fears future

*Acting behaviors include: aggression, possessiveness, headaches, stomachaches, phobias, sexual activity, increased drug use, increased risk taking, defiance, suicidal ideation

NOTE:

Emotionally and cognitively, all of the above groups may exhibit:

Irritability, anxiety, lowered self esteem, apathy, depression, feelings of rejection, distractibility, short attention spans, and a decline in school work or usual ability to attend to a task or to play.