

# Developmental Stages of Understanding Death and Grieving

All children develop at different rates - this information is meant to be used as a guideline, not as a checklist.

**Infancy:** When a member of the family dies, an infant may receive less physical/loving care because of the caregiver's grieving. The infant may react to this situation in a physical manner with increases of crying and not being able to be easily soothed, developing slight skin rashes or clinging to caregivers. Generally, these behaviors are temporary and will diminish as caregivers are again able to focus normal attention to the infant.

## Grieving caregivers can be advised to:

- Spend some time each day in a nurturing, soothing manner with the infant.
- Keep the infant's routine as consistent as possible.
- Let other nurturing family members help with caregiving.
- Allow others to help with household tasks.

**Birth to Three Years Old:** Infants and toddlers have very little comprehension of the concept of death but can pick up on stress and other emotions from the adults around them. They may show signs of irritability or exhibit changes in eating and nursing patterns, crying, or bladder and bowel movements. They may sense when a significant person is missing and ask for that person repeatedly.

## Understanding of Death

- Recognize absence of person despite inability to comprehend concept of death

## How Grief is Expressed

- Loss may be demonstrated through detachment or withdrawal demonstrated by sluggishness, being quiet, unresponsive to a smile or a coo
- Sleeping and eating patterns could change
- May protest by crying more than usual, becoming more irritable or demanding
- May need more physical comforting, holding, rocking, nurturing
- May experience bladder or bowel disturbances

## Helpful Approaches

- Provide consistent and secure routine as much as possible
- Provide physical, nurturing and loving contact

## Preschoolers

### Three to Five Years Old:

Three- to five-year-olds may begin to understand that death is feared by some adults, but think of death as temporary or reversible, as in cartoons. They do not understand death is permanent. Death may be confused with sleeping or the person merely being absent, with the belief the person will return.

Since children are egocentric, death may be perceived as punishment for wrongdoing or caused because the child had previously wished the person dead. They may feel that their thoughts or actions have caused the death and/or sadness of those around them and thus may have feelings of guilt and shame.

Sometimes, death is thought of as violent. Children also sometimes think they might catch the condition which caused the death. Some children think dead people live underground.

During play they may pretend that some living thing has died and then bring it back to life, so they need concrete explanations about death: that the body has stopped working and won't start working again, that the person who has died does not eat, sleep, or breathe.

### **Understanding of Death**

- Perceive death as temporary and reversible
- Need concrete explanations of death and its meaning (“the body stopped working”, “dead means never breathing, eating, talking, or moving again”) otherwise might get it mixed up with sleeping or being away on a trip
- May initially seem unaffected by news of death (“Oh, can I go play now?”)
- May confuse death with sleep and may experience anxiety
- May feel responsible for the death

### **How Grief is Expressed**

- May express somatic complaints (stomach aches, headaches)
- Frequently have fears and separation anxiety following death
- Be comforted in usual routines (mealtime, play time, bedtime)
- May show little concern at times
- Bedwetting, thumb-sucking, baby talk, fear of the dark
- May openly talk about death, even to strangers
- May need to talk about death a lot. These repetitions make it real for the child, and they may say things, such as “Ben can't use his dump truck anymore cause he's dead.”

### **Helpful Approaches**

- Reassure the child regarding routines, activities and schedules.
- Tell them what to expect regarding the funeral, parents/family grieving.
- Explain to them how things might look and what might happen.
- Include the child in funeral rituals
- Be open to discussing whatever comes up
- Keep explanations short, simple, and truthful. The explanations may need to be frequently repeated.
- Use the words (and encourage all adults to do the same): dead and death. Do not say words/phrases such as: deceased, is sleeping, passed away, went away, resting, taken from us, etc.

## School Age

### **Six To Nine Years Old:**

From six to nine years of age, the child begins to perceive death as possible for others but not for them.

School-age children may still experience magical thinking, beliefs that they did something to cause the death or that the dead person can come back, but they may also start to understand the permanence and universality of death. They may become more interested in the physical aspects of death and ask questions about how someone stops breathing, what a dead body looks like, or where people go after they die.

They may have concerns for their own safety or the safety of their loved ones, worrying that death is contagious and that they will “catch it.” Fear of the unknown, loss of control, and separation from family and friends can be major sources of anxiety and fear related to death.

### **Understanding of Death**

- Still employ “magical thinking,” so may have difficulty understanding permanence of death at first
- May see death as final but only something that happens to old people (and not to themselves)
- Curious about what happens to person when they die, and the biological process
- Death may be thought of as a person or spirit (i.e. ghost, skeleton)
- May have difficulty expressing feelings when asking questions

### **How Grief is Expressed**

- May have exaggerated fears about school and separation anxiety
- Strongly attuned to grief/emotional responses of key adults in their lives; may reflect adult moods in their moods
- May experience intense fear of other attachment figures dying
- Think their actions and words caused the death

### **Helpful Approaches**

- Explain the physical process of dying, e.g. that the body stops working

### **Nine to Twelve Years Old:**

Between nine to twelve years, the child will perceive death as including them. Tweens are often coming closer to an adult understanding of death, that it is permanent and that every living thing dies. Death is becoming more real, final, universal and inevitable.

The child may show interest in biological aspects of death and want to know details of the funeral. They also have more of an ability to understand abstractions like an afterlife or a soul and may be very interested in helping with rituals.

They may express concern about how the death will directly affect them. “Who will come to my soccer games if Grandpa can’t come?”

Their ability to talk about their emotions may not be fully developed, so it can be helpful to offer emotional cues. “I was feeling really sad today about John and I wondered if you were feeling sad too.”

### **Understanding of Death**

- Understand that death is permanent

### **How Grief is Expressed**

- May experience school phobias and separation anxiety
- May express somatic complaints (headaches, stomach aches)
- May stop expressing grief to “protect” parents or siblings or to appear strong and “in control”
- Vulnerable to “parentification”, i.e. taking on adult roles to help grieving adult family members
- Think actions and words caused the death

### **Helpful Approaches**

- Include in funeral arrangements and rituals
- Suggest making a memory/scrapbook, writing poems, journaling
- Encourage communication

### **Adolescence:**

Adolescents usually have a mature understanding of death, including the physical realities and abstract ideas. Developmentally, the adolescent is searching for explanations regarding all aspects of life which includes death. Many “why” questions are asked which often cannot be adequately answered by adults.

Most adolescents are beginning to establish their identity, independence, and relationship with peer groups. A common theme in adolescence is feelings of immortality or being exempt from death, so an experience of death can threaten these objectives. They may feel as if they no longer belong or fit in with their peers, or that they are unable to communicate with adults.

They may also intellectualize or romanticize death to gain distance.

Adolescents will frequently have encountered several situations of loss in addition to death. These losses may include separation of friends, separation and/or divorce of parents, etc. Often deaths of friends, relatives, or acquaintances will trigger feelings of unresolved grief.

Adolescents frequently respond to death very intensely.

### **Understanding of Death**

- Understand that death is permanent

### **How Grief is Expressed**

- Grief complicated by intense challenges of adolescence (increased independence and responsibilities, physical changes, sexuality, identity development)
- Commonly experience temporary decreases in school performance
- May experience depression, guilt, and concerns about things said or left unsaid

- Anger may manifest in tantrums, defiance, or withdrawal
- Think if they show their feelings, they will be weak
- Do not talk about their loved one dying because they don't want to appear different from their peers

### **Helpful Approaches**

- Listen to your teen
- Set reasonable limits and handle serious behavior problems appropriately
- Tell other significant adults in your teens' life about the loss
- Provide information for the questions asked
- Physically and verbally comfort students – acknowledgement of their pain
- Flex the students' schedule as needed
- Referral to appropriate counseling resources
- Admit that adults do not always know why certain events happen

### **School-age children and adolescents may show these behaviors:**

- Crying and/or sobbing
- Anxiety
- Headaches
- Abdominal pain
- Denial of death
- Hostile reaction toward deceased
- Guilt
- Failure to complete homework
- Poor grades
- Lack of attention and concentration
- Loss of manual skills
- Fear of continuing friendship bonds: might lose another friend

### **Teens:**

Whether they display it or not, a cluster of emotions such as sadness, anger, guilt, frustration, fear, anxiety, or apathy may occur when a teen has experienced a loss.

The grief that teens experience often comes suddenly and unexpectedly. A parent may die of a sudden heart attack, a brother or sister may be killed in an auto accident, or a friend may commit suicide. The very nature of these deaths often results in a prolonged and heightened sense of unreality. If adults are open, honest and loving, experiencing the loss of someone loved can be a chance for young people to learn about both the joy and pain that comes from caring deeply for others.

### **Teen Response to Loss**

In the teenage years, people are in the process of examining the values and beliefs they learned as children and then defining their own values and beliefs. They are struggling with the questions: "Who am I?", "How does the world work and what is my place in it?" This is often seen as their pushing away or "rebellious". It is a natural and normal part of development.

Coping with a death and experiencing grief during this stage of development can cause further challenges in struggling with these questions because they are torn between wanting to be independent and needing support from their parents and family. Consequently, teens' feelings about death and loss may be conflicting and very intense.

Because of this need for independence, teens turn to their peers for grief support and understanding. When teens are grieving, they may not be able to find help within their own circle. Teens may also try to hide their grief because they don't want to be pitied or viewed as weak, emotional, or as being different.

The experience of grief increases a teens' sense of isolation.

### **Teens That Are Grieving and Coping with Death Can Be Helped By:**

- Communicating with a person or group of people their own age who are also grieving and can understand and share their experience
- Being encouraged, and having permission, to feel and think whatever comes up for them
- Understanding that grieving is a natural healing process that takes time
- Caring adults, whether parents, teachers, counselors or friends, can help teens during this time

### **Signs of Complicated Grief that May Require Professional Care**

- Lack of concentration often seen in declining grades
- Loss of interest in usual activities
- Over-activity, acting too busy (trying to block out the pain)
- Deep sadness / excessive hopelessness
- Pronounced self-blame or guilt
- Poor self-care
- Ongoing nightmares/sleep disturbance
- Apparent absence of grief or unwillingness to discuss the loss
- Risk-taking behaviors
- Drug and/or alcohol use
- Promiscuity
- Eating too much or not at all
- Social isolation/extreme withdrawal
- Suicidal thoughts or plans