

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF UNDERSTANDING DEATH AND GRIEVING

Infancy:

When a member of the family dies, an infant may receive less physical/loving care as a result of the caregiver's grieving. The infant may react to this situation in a physical manner with an increase in 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 care giving.
- Allow others to help with household tasks.

Preschool Age:

Preschoolers do not understand that death is permanent and view it as reversible and temporary. 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 has previously wished the person dead. 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.

Preschoolers may exhibit these possible behaviors upon the death of a parent, peer, or other love one:

- May show little concern at times.
- Bedwetting, thumb sucking, baby talk, fear of the dark.
- Fear of separating from significant others.
- May need to talk about death a lot. These repetitions make it real for the child and he/she may say things, such as, "Ben can't use his dump truck anymore cause he's dead."

Adults can do the following to help a child cope with death:

- Tell them what to expect regarding the funeral, parents/family grieving.
- Explain to them how things might look and what might happen.
- Encourage all adults in the school to use terms "dead/death" and not phrases of "passed away," "sleeping," "resting," or "taken from us." Children think in literal terms and may fear going to sleep themselves.
- Reassure the child regarding routines, activities, and schedules.
- Keep explanations short, simple, and truthful. Explanations may need to be frequently repeated.

School Age:

From five to nine years of age, the child begins to perceive death as possible for others but not for him/her.

Between nine and eleven years, the child will perceive death as including them. 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.

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Adolescents will frequently have encountered several situations of loss in addition to death. These losses may include separation from friends, relatives, or acquaintances, and may trigger feelings of unresolved grief. Adolescents frequently respond to death very intensely. Developmentally, the adolescent is searching for explanations regarding all aspects of life which includes death.

Adolescents may view death and its affect in the following ways:

- peaceful sleep that will make everything better
- punishing someone
- making someone express love for them
- satisfaction from fantasies about death
- death being glamorized
- reunited with someone who died
- escape from feelings of hopelessness/helplessness

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
- poor grades
- lack of attention
- loss of manual skills
- fear of continuing friendship bonds: might lose another friend

Adults can help school-age children and adolescents by:

- Providing information for the questions asked.
- Physically and verbally comforting students—acknowledgement of their pain.
- Flexing the student's schedule as needed.
- Referral to appropriate counseling resources.
- Admitting that adults do not always know why certain events happen.

“Memory is the lasting link that can help children and adults accept a death.”