

How children and young people of different ages may understand and respond to death

The concept of death from a child's perspective is very different from an adult's understanding of death. Furthermore, as the child grows and matures, earlier ways of thinking about death will change. It is essential for the adult to have a sense of how children conceptualize death at different ages so that when the time comes to talk about death the adult can respond in a manner appropriate to the child's developmental age. The ages given below are not meant to be exact but representative of the differing developmental stages.

Infants – Birth to 2 Years

Although there is no ability to conceptualise death and there is not a memory capacity for specific personal relationships, infants feel loss and separation. The death of the primary caregiver will usually result in displeasure and signs of anxiety such as being fractious and unsettled. In addition, an infant is likely to internalise in some way the grief and emotional responses of the adults around them.

Toddlers – 3 to 4 Years

Even though young children will not understand the permanence of death they will understand that something serious has happened. It is advisable to let nurseries and other care givers know so they can be understanding about any changes in the child. Young children express fear and confusion through behaviours not words and may therefore become more challenging or have difficulties with sleeping, toileting or feeding. They may also show increased separation anxiety.

Death is viewed as temporary at this age and the child may ask when the dead person is coming back or believe they will return if they are very good. They can appear unconcerned when told of the death which can be distressing for adults. Children of this age understand language in a very literal way so it is important to use simple, factual explanations to avoid confusion. Expressions such as 'lost', 'passed away' and 'sleeping' may reinforce an expectation that the deceased can be found or reawaken.

Children - 5 to 7 Years

Children in this age group can vary enormously in their understanding of the world and death. Most likely they will know the words death and dying but will probably still not have a real understanding of its permanence, imagining that they can return or are in an actual physical place somewhere, such as heaven. Generally, there is no concept of a personal death; death is something that only happens to other people. They may start to express concerns that other significant adults will also die.

Children - 7 to 9 Years

Children begin to grasp the finality of death and may develop an increased interest in the physical and biological aspects of death. However, this increased factual understanding of death is often mixed with fantasies such as a preoccupation with skeletons and ghosts. "Magical thinking", believing that thoughts can make things happen such as accidents and death can be confusing and frightening at this time.

There may be little understanding of the impact of the death on others, a denial of the death or a focus on their own feelings all of which can be distressing for adults supporting the child.

Children - 9 to 12 Years

A more realistic understanding of the permanence and irreversibility of death develops which can bring worries about the future and how they and the family will be impacted. They may repeatedly go over the details of the death and experience irrational thoughts and emotions around how they might have caused the death or could somehow have changed what happened. Some children can become anxious and insecure appearing to regress whilst others can exhibit pseudo-adult behaviour and, if it is a parent who has died, try to assume their role in the family.

Adolescents

Teenagers will most likely be characteristically unpredictable and volatile in their responses to hearing that a loved one has died. Some may want to be close to the family, ignoring school and social lives whilst others may distance themselves in a way that can feel hurtful and rejecting. The peer group can be very important and 'acting out' behaviours worrying for caregivers. It is important to give young people space to process their changing emotions whilst trying to maintain usual boundaries and rules will help them to feel safe at such a confusing time.