

How Children Understand Death and Express Grief

Age 0-2

Infants and toddlers do not have concepts for death or the future. They experience grief as a particular moment when someone's voice or smell is absent when it should be present.

Infants may express grief by acting clingy or irritable. They may have changes in their eating or sleeping routines.

Toddlers may initially express feelings of loss by looking repeatedly for the person who has died. They may look in a familiar spot or in the place the loved one was last seen.

If they are able to talk, they may ask for the person over and over. They may scream or act angry to try to bring their loved person back.

Eventually the toddler will give up hoping for the loved one's return and sadness will set in. The child may become temporarily uninterested in food, toys, or activities.

Giving these very young children information is not as important as meeting their physical needs and providing comfort.

Ways to help

Provide physical comfort. It may not immediately ease the pain of separation but it will eventually facilitate healing.

Accept that child's regressive behavior without criticism. They may simply be returning to an age that felt safe to them.

Give the child a piece of clothing that has the loved person's smell on it.

Give the child a picture of their loved person to carry around.

Make up a photo album from extra pictures of your loved one and keep it in a place that is accessible to the child.

Ages 2-6

By this age children are beginning to have a concept of death. They step on bugs and play pretend games with weapons, but their level of understanding about the world still makes it difficult for them to comprehend death.

First, they have confusion about what is alive and what is not alive. To them, cars or toys are sometimes as alive as people.

Second, they have difficulty understanding why things happen. They believe in magical thinking and may think they've caused their loved person's death by their behavior, actions, thoughts or wishes.

Third, they are not able to grasp the concept that death is permanent. Even if they are told that death will be forever, they may interpret forever as being slightly longer than Mom or Dad's last business trip.

They are curious about changes they see happening and if they are not given enough information they will make up explanations which are based on fantasy.

It is very important to give children of this age simple but literal information.

Parents often perceive children at this age as being relatively unaffected by the news of death. They may go outside to play shortly after hearing the news and they may not cry at all.

They may do or say things that seem inappropriate to adults.

They often have new or increased fears and nightmares for some time after the death.

At this age children are not able to understand abstract concepts such as heaven. They may picture it as a bunch of dead bodies laying all over the ground or a place like jail where people are forced to stay against their will.

The concept of forever is also too abstract. It may take several months for a child of this age to realize that a person is not coming back.

Children in this age group express grief by using behaviors, art and play. They rarely use words to describe their feelings.

They may turn the couch into a casket and play dead.

They may draw angels, rainbows, caskets and other death symbols.

This is very healthy and should be encouraged.

At some point they start displaying behavior changes such as increased anger, regression of clingy behavior.

Ways to help

Get the children an art pad or an empty book to keep a drawing journal. Encourage them to draw anything that comes to their mind about the person who has died.

Give positive comments about the child's death play and art, and make suggestions for further exploration. If the child pretends a stuffed animal has died, suggest having a funeral and inviting other animals.

Be patient as you repeat information about death's permanence.

Set limits for inappropriate behaviors and accept that child's regression.

Ages 7-11

By this age children grasp that death is permanent and they generally understand it is caused by something beyond themselves, although there still may be some magical thinking on younger ones.

They are not yet able to fully understand abstract concepts like heaven, and they begin expressing concern and anxiety related to their own illness or death.

The body becomes a focus for children of this age. They fear bodily mutilation and they may be particularly disturbed by physical changes they see happening to their loved one.

By this age children have a much greater understanding of the future, and therefore what the loss will mean to them.

Even though they yearn for the person who has died, they often hide their tears because they don't want to appear childish about the death.

They don't want to be different in any way from their peers. And they are very sensitive to teasing from other children about the death.

Because they are aware that they too could die, these children may become fearful of sleep or darkness, or they may worry that their own aches and pains could lead to death.

They may try to hold on to their loved one by adapting his/her behaviors and mannerisms. Photos and objects which belonged to the person who has died are particularly important to children of this age.

They have a well-developed capacity for feelings of guilt and often have regrets about things they did or didn't do before the death.

Although children in this age group are more capable of language, they tend to express their grief in art, stories, music, play and aggressive behaviors.

There tends to be a lot of aggression problems in school, especially for boys. There may also be aggressive, withdrawn or overly grown-up behaviors.

Ways to help

Encourage keeping a journal, drawing pictures or writing stories, poems or music about their feelings or experiences.

Spend time with them, but don't badger them about how they are doing.

Allow for energy release through physical play.

Set limits for aggression and accept regressive behaviors.

Model and encourage the expression of a range of emotions.

Create rituals that encourage releasing feelings of guilt. Writing letters to the person who has died may be helpful.

Be careful not to assume that kids who are quiet or who act "overly grown-up" are doing okay. Their grief may be too painful to express.

Offer reading materials to read alone or together.

Teens

Teenagers have a full comprehension of death. They understand that death is irreversible and universal. They can understand the basics of terminal disease.

They can grasp abstract ideas related to death and they tend to shut out thoughts of their own death.

Teens may feel they need to be strong so they can care for the rest of the family.

Their pain tends to express itself through physical symptoms, depression and anger.

They will likely be moody, and they may become bossy in an effort to appear powerful and in control.

Teens frequently express anxiety about the death by being reckless with their own lives to show that they are not vulnerable to death. They may drive at high speeds or abuse drugs or alcohol.

They may increase sexual activity in an attempt to receive physical comfort. Boys may seek body contact and tension relief by fighting and becoming aggressive.

There are usually problems with dropping grades in school, even if the death was expected for quite some time.

This can be a very confusing time for teens as they struggle to become independent from their parents, yet suddenly find themselves feeling helpless and dependent.

Language is that way teenagers most often express their feelings of grief. They may feel, however, that emotional expression is not acceptable to the friends.

Ways to help

Watch for reckless or impulsive behaviors.

Set limits, but don't become too controlling.

Be available to them and encourage getting support from others.

Offer books about teen grief or purchase a teen grief workbook for their private use.

