

GUIDELINES FOR UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN'S REACTIONS TO DEATH

- Listen to the child with your heart, your head and your ears.
- Listen to what each child is asking, and answer only that question. Expect the questions to be repeated.
- Admit when you don't know the answer by saying so.
- Be honest. Children can deal with even devastating truth.
- Provide lots of reassurance, acceptance and caring. Children are often concerned about who will care for them.
- Explain "dead" in terms of the cessation of life processes: the person is no longer breathing, his heart is not beating, he can no longer eat and he does not feel pain.
- Avoid euphemisms such as "we lost daddy," "living with God" and "gone to sleep."
- Share your own feelings.
- Recognize that children grieve differently than adults. They often express their feelings and reactions through their play, as this is the language of children.
- Children may act out their feelings in seemingly unacceptable ways as they do not understand their emotions or what to do with them.

Children's Understanding of Death and Special Needs

Ages 0–2

Concept of death: "All gone" may be understood as an absence.

- If the young infant cannot see something, it does not exist. Hide-and-seek games after six months help infants develop the concept that things and people exist even without being seen. Infants and small children can sense the emotional state of those around them and may exhibit increased crying, fussiness or gastro-intestinal problems.
- Try to provide a sense of security through lots of nurturing and routine.

Preschool, ages 3–5

Concept of death: Death may be thought of as temporary and/or reversible.

- The child may believe giving food can revive the dead person. They often do not understand their feelings, but are frightened by them and do not know what is happening to them. Questions about the death may be asked over and over, and their play may act out the death. Regression can occur with clinging, thumb sucking, loss of potty training, or baby talk. They have a great need to return to normal activities (such as play and school). Their openness about the death with people, including strangers, can be overwhelming to adults.



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Preschool, ages 3–5 (continued)

- Provide them with terms for some of their feelings. Answer questions honestly, especially about why important people in their life are sad. Death play and short-term regression are normal—offer presence and caring.

Grade school, ages 6–11

Concept of death: Children understand that all body functions stop with death. They begin to internalize the universality and permanence of death. The greatest death anxiety is in this age group.

- They may be very curious about the details of death, but begin to hide feelings or engage in magical thinking where they believe they are powerful enough to cause someone's death by their thoughts. There may also be fear that death is a punishment for bad thoughts or actions.
- Offer constructive ways for them to release the great energy of grief, such as running, other sports activities, or hitting a tennis racket on a mattress. Encourage a support group or writing. Provide reassurance and honesty.

Adolescents, ages 12 and up

Concept of death: Adolescents understand death as a natural process, but have difficulty dealing with it as they are occupied with many decisions in their own lives.

- The loss may be protested through acting out and/or withdrawing or overachieving. Teens tend to focus on what effect the death has had on them and thus dwell on the unfairness of life. They become concerned about the “why” questions of life and death and may test their own mortality.
- Try to tolerate acting-out behaviors if no harm is done. A short period of withdrawal is normal. Encourage the search for meaning in a healthy way. Teens are often more comfortable talking about death with their friends than with adults. Continue to set reasonable limits and let them know you care about them.