



A CHILD'S VIEW OF DEATH

These are broad outlines describing a child's perception of death. Children and adults grieve differently. As children grow and mature their understanding of death and human relationships change. At every developmental stage, children may need to re-grieve or re-experience their losses.

Developmental State (Age)	Child's Perception of Death	Frequently Observed Behaviors	How to Help
Infant/ Toddler (birth-3 years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No understanding of death • Limited understanding of time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children sense when the adults around them are sad or preoccupied • May demonstrate an increased need for touching or holding • Increased separation anxiety • Somatic concerns, such as problems with feeding and/or digestion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer abundant love • Meet their increased attachment needs, to include eye contact, loving facial expressions, touching, rocking, singing • Offer the child a transitional object, such as a soft blanket or stuffed animal
Preschool (3-5 yrs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Death seen as reversible or temporary • Children may think they are at fault • Children absorb only as much as they can understand • Confusion about what is real/not real • "Magical thinking" is common • Their understanding is very literal • Children at this age do not typically comprehend metaphor • Their emotions are difficult for them to understand and verbalize 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May act out or relieve anxiety through fantasy instead of talking to you • May feel at fault or guilty • May fear being left alone • Regressive behavior is common (may act as they did when they were younger, such as thumb sucking or bed wetting) • May not understand sadness around them • Repeated explanations may be needed • Behavioral changes common (may become withdrawn) • Will take breaks from grieving by resorting to playing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help child identify and understand own feelings • Accept regressive behavior • Reaffirm that the child is not at fault" • Help child grasp what's real and not real • "The body stop working" is a helpful first definition of death • Be clear that dying is not the same as sleeping • Reassure child that he/she will be cared for; demonstrate that care with closeness and love

<p>School Age (6-7yrs)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beginning to see death as final, universal, but only for others ("not me") • Neither believes nor denies that he/she will die • May believe he/she can escape by being good or trying hard • Death often viewed as an actual person, spirit, or being (such as the "boogey man") 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings may be shared with you or held in and may be out of the child's control • Coping may take the form of gathering information, becoming an expert about the disease or condition • May regress to a younger stage, earlier needs and actions • Repeated explanations may be needed to help understanding • May see changes in behavior: some children become aggressive, others withdraw. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow child to talk or not talk as needed • Answer questions honestly and concretely • Respect their "need to know." Having information gives a child some sense of control • Art and poetry are helpful outlets for emotional expression • Work with child's teachers at school to help grieving process and watch for isolation from classmates
<p>School Age (7-11yrs)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understands death as permanent and irreversible • Child may begin to question own mortality, asking "Am I next?" • Vivid ideas of what occurs after death • May be concerned with details of what happens after a person dies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings may be talked about, expressed or kept to themselves • Regressive behavior common (including increased separation anxiety) • Relationship with friends important • May see changes in behavior and moods. Grades in school may suffer • May take on role of person who died, seeking to "repair" the loss 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support child's style or coping • Be available, supportive • Acknowledge importance of friends • Do not ask child to be strong, brave, grown-up, in-control, or to comfort others • Help with good-byes • Say "I don't know" when you do not know the answers
<p>Adolescent 12+yrs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full awareness of own mortality • Attitudes toward death similar to adults • Possible "survivor guilt" if sibling or friend dies • Relationship with siblings and friends can be quite intense at this age 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Range of emotions may include anger, sorrow and guilt. Mood changes are common • Expression of "might have been", "Why?" And "If only" • Increased reliance on peers • Striving for independence, yet often fragile inside • Grades and extracurricular activities may suffer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I'm here if you need me" • Understanding that friends are important; find support groups if possible • Respect adolescent's need to work through independently • Encourage journaling, diaries, art, and poetry as means of expressing strong emotions