



Children and grief: Developmental stage guide

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE: 2- TO 4-YEAR-OLDS

DEATH UNDERSTANDING

Children this age **do not understand** that death happens to everybody and is permanent. They express themselves through their behavior and play. They are curious about death. They might ask: "My mom died. When will she be home?" "Will you die, too?" "Will I die?"

COMMON RESPONSES

- Feel anxious or cry
- Have problems with sleep
- Need more attention
- Need to be held
- Act cranky or have temper tantrums
- Tell the story to anyone, including strangers
- Ask the same questions over and over
- Go back to doing things that they used to do (like help tying shoes, bedwetting, thumb sucking, baby talk, feeling anxious when someone they love leaves)

WAYS TO HELP

- Create a consistent routine so they know what to expect. Routines are very helpful at the start and end of day.
- Provide comfort items: blankets, fidgets, play dough and toys.
- Offer physical comfort: hold their hand, give a gentle shoulder squeeze, brush their hair.
- Use the words death, dead and died to be clear.
- Answer questions honestly but simply.
- Give choices whenever possible.
- Create space for active play and get outdoors. Provide good nutrition.

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE: 5- TO 8-YEAR-OLDS

DEATH UNDERSTANDING

Children this age are exploring their independence and trying tasks on their own. They often see death as temporary. Their thoughts are based on what they see, hear and feel. They may have magical thinking. They believe their thoughts and wishes have power. This may cause them to feel responsible and worry that their thoughts caused the situation to happen.

COMMON RESPONSES

- Wake up often or have nightmares
- Change in their eating habits
- Ask the same questions over and over
- Worry about their safety and being abandoned
- Have short periods of strong emotion mixed with acting as though nothing has happened
- Go back to doing things they used to do (like bedwetting, thumb sucking and needing help to get dressed)
- Have changes in their behavior
- Have high or low energy
- May act out
- Have body pains (like stomachache, headache)

WAYS TO HELP

- Create space for active play and get outdoors. Provide good nutrition.
- Answer questions openly and honestly and in a way they can understand.
- Use the words death, dead and died to be clear.
- Provide comfort items: blankets, fidgets, play dough and toys.
- Offer physical comfort: hold their hand, give a gentle shoulder squeeze, brush their hair.
- Provide a sense of safety: stable routine, give information about changes, keep boundaries.
- Give choices whenever possible.
- Talk to teachers about giving extra support and flexibility with homework and due dates.

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE: 9- TO 12-YEAR-OLDS

DEATH UNDERSTANDING

Children at this age still think based on what they see, hear and feel, but they are starting to understand abstract ideas like death. They begin to know that death is permanent and start to think about how death will affect them. Some children will focus on what happens to the body and ask lots of questions. They can feel guilty and think that their thoughts and actions made the death happen.

COMMON RESPONSES

- Express their emotions in a big way
- Feel anxious and concerned about their or others' safety
- Think that the world is no longer safe
- Worry about something bad happening again
- Struggle to concentrate and focus
- Have nightmares and intrusive thoughts
- Ask detailed questions about death and dying
- Have pains in their body (stomachache, headache, body pain, etc.)
- Express a wide range of emotions
- Sensitive to changes to routine
- Avoid social situations

WAYS TO HELP

- Offer different ways to express themselves (art, taking pictures, journaling).
- Encourage them to move their bodies.
- Help identify people and activities that make them feel safe and supported.
- Work to create a feeling of safety and routine in daily life.
- Maintain routines and limits but be flexible when necessary.
- Show them how to take care of themselves by sharing your feelings and taking care of yourself.
- Try not to give advice, judge their behaviors or dismiss their thoughts and feelings.
- Talk to teachers about giving extra support and flexibility with homework and due dates.
- Seek counseling for any concerns of self-harm or suicidal thoughts.

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE: 13- TO 18 -YEAR-OLDS

DEATH UNDERSTANDING

Teens are able to understand abstract thoughts about life and death. They begin to see themselves as unique individuals, separate from their family members. They may struggle with their identity. There may be big changes to their spirituality, sexuality or how they look. Teens often rely on peers and others outside the family for support. Teens understand that death happens to everyone and is permanent. They may explore the meaning of life, death and traumatic events.

COMMON RESPONSES

- Withdraw from family or other support networks
- Focus on connections with peers
- Increase risk taking (drugs, alcohol, shoplifting, reckless driving)
- Be unable to concentrate
- Struggle with school or needing to be perfect
- Have problems with sleeping
- Be exhausted
- Not want to eat or eat too much
- Have unpredictable and intense emotional reactions
- Not be comfortable talking about the death
- Worry about their or others' safety
- Have a fear of death or violence
- Be confused about their role within the family
- Try to take on parent or caregiver roles
- Be hyper-careful (or alert, or watchful)
- May think about self-harm and suicide

WAYS TO HELP

- Reinforce safety and security, even if teens don't express concerns.
- Maintain routines and set clear expectations, be flexible when needed.
- Allow for expression of feelings without trying to change, fix or take them away.
- Adjust expectations for concentration and task completion.
- Talk to teachers about giving extra support and flexibility with homework and due dates.
- Assist teens in connecting with support systems, including other adults.
- Show them how to take care of themselves by sharing your feelings and taking care of yourself.
- Ask open-ended questions and listen without judging, interpreting, advising or calming.
- Find professional help for any concerns of self-harm or suicidal thoughts.