

When a family member dies, children react differently than adults. Preschool children usually see death as temporary and reversible - a belief reinforced by cartoon characters who “die” and “come to life” again. Children between five and nine begin to think more like adults about death, yet they still believe it will never happen to them or anyone they know.

Adding to a child’s shock and confusion at the death of a brother, sister or parent is the unavailability of other family members who may be so shaken by grief that they are not able to cope with the normal responsibilities of child care.

It is normal during the weeks following the death for some children to feel immediate grief while some will persist in the belief that the family member is still alive. The long-term denial of the death can later surface in more severe problems.

A child who is frightened about attending a funeral should not be forced to go. However, some service or observance is recommended, such as lighting a candle, saying a prayer or visiting the grave site.

Once children accept the death, they are likely to display their feelings of sadness on and off over a long period of time. Make it clear that the child has permission to show his or her feelings openly and freely.

Anger is a natural reaction. The anger may be revealed in boisterous play, nightmares, irritability or a variety of other behaviors. Often the child will show anger towards surviving family members.

After a parent dies, many children will act younger. The child may temporarily become more infantile, demanding food, attention and cuddling and even talking “baby talk.”

If you are concerned about discussing death with your children, you’re not alone. Many of us hesitate to talk about death, particularly with youngsters. But death is an inescapable fact of life. We must deal with it and so must our children. If we are to help them, we must let them know it is okay to talk about it.

By talking to our children about death, we discover what they know and do not know - if they have misconceptions, fears or worries. We can then help them by providing needed information, comfort and understanding. Talk does not solve all problems, but without talking we are even more limited in our ability to help.

The effects of being betrayed by someone who is supposed to be responsible for your well-being can be overwhelming to a child. The impact will alter that person’s life and affect every relationship he or she ever engages in.

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CHILDREN AND GRIEF



SIGNS THAT A GRIEVING CHILD NEEDS ATTENTION

- Marked change in school performance
- Refusing to go to school, sleep or take part in age appropriate activities
- Not talking about the person; physically avoiding mention of the deceased
- Frequent angry outbursts or anger expressed in destructive ways
- Hyperactive activities, fidgeting, constant movement beyond regular playing
- Accident prone, possibly self-punishment or a call for attention
- Persistent nightmares or sleeping disorders
- Stealing, promiscuity, vandalism, illegal behavior
- Persistent disobedience or aggression (longer than six months)
- Opposition to authority figures
- Social withdrawal
- Alcohol or other drug abuse
- Inability to cope with problems and daily activities
- Many complaints of physical ailments
- Persistent depression; poor appetite, sleep difficulties, and thoughts of death
- Long term absence of emotion
- Frequent panic attacks
- Persistent symptoms of the deceased

CHARACTERISTICS OF AGE GROUPS (general guide only)

Infants - 2 Years Old:

- Will sense a loss

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- Will pick up on the grief of a parent or caretaker
 - May change eating, sleeping, toilet habits

2 - 6 Years Old:

- Family is center of child's world
- Confident family will care for her needs
- Functions on a day-to-day basis
- No understanding of time or death
- Picks up on nonverbal communication
- Thinks dead people continue to do things (eat, drink, go to the bathroom), but only in the sky
- Thinks if you walk on the grave the person feels it
- Magical thinking
- You wish it, it happens (bring the dead back or wishing someone was dead)
- Death brings confusion, guilt (magically thought someone dead)

6 - 9 Years Old:

- Personifies death: A person, monster who takes you away
- Sometimes a violent thing
- Still has magical thinking, yet begins to see death as final
- Fails to accept that death will happen to them - or to anyone (although begins to suspect that it will)
- Confusion of wording (soul/sole, dead body, live soul)
- Develops an interest in the causes of death (violence, old age, sickness)

9 - 12 Year Old:

- May see death as punishment for poor behaviour
- Develops morality - strong sense of good and bad behaviour
- Still some magical thinking
- Needs reassurance that wishes do not kill

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- Begins to express interest in biological factors of death
 - Theorizes: People die to make room for new people
 - Asks more about "what happened"
 - Concerns about ritual, burying
 - Questions relationship changes caused by death, life changes
 - Worries about who will provide and care for them
 - Interested in spiritual aspects of death
 - Concerns about ritual, burying
 - Questions relationship changes caused by death, life changes
 - Worries about who provides and cares for them
 - May regress to an earlier stage
 - Interested in spiritual aspects of death

Teenagers:

- View death as inevitable, universal, irreversible
- Think like an adult
- Question meaning of life if it ends in death
- See aging process leading to death
- See self as invincible - it will not happen to me
- Need adult guidance (grief process, coping skills)
- Need someone to listen; to talk with
- May feel guilt, anger, even some responsibility for death that occurred
- Not sure how to handle own emotions (public and private)

