

CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING AND REACTION TO DEATH ACCORDING TO AGE

Children's understanding and reaction to death will depend on their age and their developmental stage. The following are guides only as children will differ in their reactions and grasp of events for a range of reasons other than age alone.

AGES 0-2 YEARS

Infants do not understand the meaning of death

They may display anxiety when separated from a loved one

They may appear upset, subdued and uninterested in their surroundings.

AGES 2-5 YEARS

No understanding of the permanency of death

May search for the missing person from a loved one

May feel responsible for the death in some way

May become apathetic and depressed

May regress to an earlier stage of development e.g. thumb sucking, bedwetting, tantrums or may become clingy

May develop fears of going to sleep

May worry that other loved ones may die.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Continuity of normal routine e.g. mealtimes and bedtime

Offer physical comfort

Explain the death in clear, simple language, using words like "dead" and "died" - Do not use terms like "gone to sleep" or "passed away"

You may need to repeat the same information again and again

Permit them to ask questions and be consistent in your answers

Reassure them that they had nothing to do with the death and of the wellbeing of other family members.

AGES 5-9 YEARS

Beginning to realise the permanency of death, but their idea of life after death is still vague

May have concerns about how the deceased is feeling or what he/she is thinking in the grave

May have a lot of questions about aspects of the death e.g. how the person died, what they looked like, the funeral, heaven, coffins

The reaction of their peers is important, they may feel 'different' to them

Their peers may be awkward about the death and avoid contact

They may become the target of bullying.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Encourage the child to talk and cry about the deceased if they wish

to, otherwise respect their silence

Answer questions and provide as much factual information about the death as possible Reassure them that thinking and feeling ceases after death Be vigilant in relation to bullying.

AGES 9- 12 YEARS

Understand the finality and universality of death

Awareness of their own mortality and may worry about their own death

May display psychosomatic symptoms i.e. physical complaints like tummy aches

May wish to stay at home close to parents

May display anger.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Dispel fears about their own health or the health of other loved ones by offering reassurance

Encourage them to go to school

Allow them to express their anger, offering appropriate ways to do so.

ADOLESCENTS

Fully understand the finality, universality and inevitability of death. Their experience of death is similar to adults

May have a range of feelings: guilt, regret, anger, loneliness etc.

Death adds to the already confused array of emotions experienced by adolescents

May appear to not care about the death

May seek support outside of the family.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Offer them time to listen

Allow them to express their grief in their own way

Be prepared for mood swings

Don't feel left out if they seem to value their friends more than their parents

Children's use of social media should be monitored and supported by parents.

If parents are grieving themselves, they may be emotionally unable to support their other children. In this instance, another supportive adult in the child's life, e.g. other family members, friends, neighbours may need to offer emotional support.

It should be remembered that for children with special educational needs, their understanding of what has happened will be in line with their developmental age.