

## Developmental Differences in Understanding and Reacting to Death

Understanding of Death	Reactions to Death	Ways to Help
<b>Infant to 2 years old</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not understand nature or permanence of death – expect person to return</li> <li>• Experience death as separation – their special person is gone, and their world is different</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can seem unaffected</li> <li>• Searching for person who died</li> <li>• Pushing away caregivers or clinging to strangers</li> <li>• General distress, trouble sleeping or eating</li> <li>• Increased crying or difficulty self-soothing or being comforted</li> <li>• Restlessness, irritability, tantrums</li> <li>• Clinginess, separation anxiety</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid confusing terms for death like “resting,” “sleeping” or “went away” that might lead to fears of sleep or separation</li> <li>• Gently help toddler understand person cannot return and that their body no longer works</li> </ul>
<b>3 to 5 years old</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Typically have a limited and concrete understanding of death</li> <li>• May believe person can still breathe and be hungry or cold when buried</li> <li>• Believe wishes come true (“magical thinking”)</li> <li>• Often believe person could come back to life</li> <li>• May believe death was a punishment or their fault</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May seem fine at times and have difficulty self-soothing or being comforted at other times</li> <li>• Pushing away caregivers or clinging to strangers</li> <li>• Frequent questions about death</li> <li>• Confusion and increased fears or worries</li> <li>• Trouble sleeping or nightmares</li> <li>• Physical complaints, stomachaches, trouble eating</li> <li>• Restlessness, irritability, tantrums</li> <li>• Clinginess, separation fears</li> <li>• Worries about self or others dying</li> <li>• Acting younger than normal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use simple, honest language to explain death (causes of death, body stops working, cannot come back, etc.); repeat as often as child requests</li> <li>• Model and explain expressions of grief</li> <li>• Avoid confusing terms like “rest in peace” or “went away” that might lead to fears of sleep or separation</li> <li>• Provide opportunities to express their grief through play and art</li> </ul>

Understanding of Death	Reactions to Death	Ways to Help
<b>6 to 9 years old</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Depending on life experiences and education, might fully understand what death means and that it is permanent and person cannot return (usually by age 7)</li> <li>• Often worry their own thoughts or actions caused the death</li> <li>• May believe death is like a person or ghost who comes to get you</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initial denial or disbelief</li> <li>• Many questions, confusions, and fears about death</li> <li>• General distress often comes out as anger, irritability or fighting</li> <li>• Physical aches and pains</li> <li>• Trouble with school work or perfectionism</li> <li>• Attempts to conform with peers may look like “nothing is wrong”</li> <li>• Insecurities, anxiety</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer accurate information when child expresses confusion about death</li> <li>• Model and invite expression of feelings and thoughts</li> <li>• Provide physical outlets (sports, play)</li> </ul>
<b>10 to 12 years old</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fully understand what “dead” means and that death is universal (everyone dies) and irreversible (they cannot come back to life)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initial shock or denial</li> <li>• Anxiety, fears, anger, irritability</li> <li>• Aggression to avoid feeling helplessness</li> <li>• Distrust or fear of being abandoned</li> <li>• May seem self-centered or callous</li> <li>• Curiosity or fascination with death</li> <li>• Attempts to conform with peers; i.e. “nothing is wrong”— don’t want to be “different”</li> <li>• Insecurities; feelings of shame or embarrassment</li> <li>• Feeling guilty or remorseful for past actions with deceased</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Without pressuring youth to talk, make space to listen and answer questions honestly</li> <li>• Model and invite expression of feelings and thoughts</li> <li>• Provide reassurance of safety and future security, and offer physical proximity and comfort</li> <li>• Provide physical outlets (sports, running, play)</li> <li>• May be more likely to talk with peers and people outside of family; peer support groups can be helpful</li> </ul>

Understanding of Death	Reactions to Death	Ways to Help
<b>13 years old or older</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have a full adult understanding of death</li> <li>• May have ability to think abstractly and process spiritual issues and meaning in life</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling guilty or remorseful for past actions with deceased</li> <li>• Feelings of shame or embarrassment</li> <li>• Sadness, tearfulness, depression</li> <li>• Anger (at self, deceased, parents/caregivers, God, etc.)</li> <li>• Irritability, frustration</li> <li>• Distrust or fear of being abandoned</li> <li>• Curiosity or fascination with death</li> <li>• Attempts to conform with peers may look like “nothing is wrong”</li> <li>• Insecurities</li> <li>• Non-compliance, acting out, risky behaviors</li> <li>• Trouble sleeping or oversleeping, fatigue</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Without pressuring youth to talk, make space to listen and answer questions honestly</li> <li>• Model and invite expression of feelings and thoughts</li> <li>• Share books, encourage journaling, drawing, etc.</li> <li>• Avoid putting adult responsibilities or pressure on teens</li> <li>• May be more likely to talk with peers and people outside of family; peer support groups can be helpful</li> </ul>

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To learn more about the Judi's House/JAG Institute Training and Education Initiative which provides additional and customized training and education about Developmental Differences and other topics related to grief and loss, please visit:

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References: *Brief Information on Childhood Traumatic Grief* (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, [www.nctsn.org](http://www.nctsn.org)), *Dougy Center Grief Resources*

([www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org)), *Grief in Childhood* (Pearlman, Schwalbe, & Cloitre, 2010), *Helping Bereaved Children* (Webb, 2010)