

What Adults Should Know about the Developmental Stages in a Child's Understanding of Death and Grief

If you are concerned or feel you are ill-prepared to discuss death with your child, you are not alone. Many of us hesitate to talk about dying and death, even with other adults.

- Each age group has different thoughts about death:

Preschool: Preschool children usually think death is reversible and temporary.

Ages 5 – 9: Most children in this age group begin to realize that death is final and that all living things die, but they may not yet see death as personal.

Ages 9 - Adolescence: Children of this age group perceive that death is irreversible and that all living things die.

- It is important to remember, however, that children develop at their own individual rates and have their own ways of expressing and handling feelings. The greatest need your child will have is your understanding. It is important to be honest, concise and basic in your explanations and responses.
- In our efforts to protect children from pain, adults often use euphemisms (other words, sayings) to explain death to children. Saying that someone has “passed on, gone to sleep for a very long time or gone to heaven” can be confusing to children. Children will fill in the empty places with their own ideas, causing fear and uncertainty. Be honest about the details of the death.
- Don't misunderstand what may seem to be a lack of feelings when a loved one dies. We all grieve in different ways. Some people may think that a child is not grieving because he or she plays or has fun. Be aware that this is a child's way of dealing with pain.
- Realize that children's bodies react when they experience grief. Children may experience feeling tired, having stomach aches, headaches and trouble sleeping. While these things do go away over time, children need you to understand.
- Keep in mind that all these feelings are not something to be ashamed of or something to hide. Grieving is a normal expression of love for the person who has died.

With your love, compassion and understanding, you can make the process of grieving a valuable learning experience for you and your child.