

Childhood Grief: Developmental Concepts and Typical Grief Responses

Infancy to age 2: Infants at this age are unable to understand the abstract concept of “death”. However, this does not mean the death will not have a noticeable effect on the little one. When someone of significance to the infant dies, the infant is likely to be very aware of the loss and separation. They may feel varying levels of discomfort associated with sudden changes in their regular schedule and amount of nurturance they receive. Infants also can sense what their caregiver is experiencing, so be sure to care for yourself during the grieving process.

What can you expect to see?

- Infants may search for the deceased person and become anxious as they experience the separation. Common grief reactions to this anxiety include irritability and defiance, excessive crying, changes in sleeping and/or eating habits, decreased activity, and weight loss.

Ages 2-4 (Pre-school): Pre-school aged children do not understand the permanence of death. It is not uncommon to hear the child ask when the deceased person will be returning. During these ages, children instead see death as temporary and reversible, despite parents’ best efforts to explain to the child that the deceased will not be returning. It is best to provide concrete, clear messages about death, such as, “He/she has died, which means we will not be able to see him/her anymore”, as opposed to using euphemisms such as “he/she has travelled to the great beyond”. Additionally, pre-school children do not see death as something that could ever happen to them.

What can you expect to see?

- Pre-school age grief reactions can be very brief, but very intense at the same time. Due to this being a stage in life where the child is learning to trust and build basic attachments, they tend to become very concerned about separation and any changes to their caregiving routine. You may see a heightened concern regarding separations and rejections.
- At the same time, pre-school age children are constantly observing the emotional reactions of the adults in their life. It is common for a child to cry or have a meltdown in response to seeing their caregivers sad or worried. This can be due to the child being concerned, or also as a method to distract their parents from their own distressing emotions.
- Common grief reactions of pre-school age children include confusion, nightmares, nighttime agitation, regressive behaviors (clinging to adults, wetting the bed after being previously potty-trained, thumb sucking, inconsolable crying, tantrums), and in some cases social withdrawal. Lastly, you may continue to see the child searching for the deceased person despite explanations that they are not going to return.

Ages 4-7 (Early Childhood): Children in this age range still typically do not understand the permanence of death. These children can sometimes believe it is they who have caused the death of the deceased one due to the negative thoughts and/or feelings they have had about that person. This is due to the natural belief of this age group that they control what happens in their environment. These children also sometimes personify death, such as thinking of death as the boogey man or a ghost.

What can you expect to see?

- As with pre-school age children, this age range will often look for the deceased individual. It is also very common for the child to ask repeated questions about death. These children will more than likely express feelings related to grief in the form of play as opposed to verbally. It is not uncommon to see grieving children play act out the death itself or the funeral. Themes of family loss and death may come up in pretend play with friends, dolls, and/or action figures.
- You may also see a regression in behaviors aimed at acquiring more nurturance and attention. It is common for children this age to fear losing their other loved ones as well. Children can at times even seek out and form attachments to people who resemble the deceased in some way.

- Grieving children at this age may display anger, sadness, confusion, and troubles with eating and/or sleeping. However, sometimes children will seem unaffected by the death. Be wary that this does not mean the child is oblivious or has accepted the death. This reaction could be due to the child's inability to acknowledge very distressing feelings.

Ages 7-10 (Middle Years): By these ages, children have begun to understand the permanence of death. Although children now typically understand death can occur to anyone, they still commonly don't believe it will happen to themselves nor their loved ones. Instead they tend to believe death can only occur in very old and/or very sick individuals. Children at this age also often express a normal but intense curiosity about death, cremation, and burial.

What can you expect to see?

- Children in this age range will often become more invested in the emotions and grief reactions of others as opposed to themselves. They may fear that their other loved ones will die as well, or even at times become preoccupied with their own physical health, fearing their own bodily harm and/or death. You can help your child by reassuring them of your own health and reminding them that not everyone who gets sick will die.
- It is common to see reactions such as shock, denial, depression, eating/sleeping pattern changes, regression to earlier developmental stages, and the child may struggle academically due to concentration difficulties. They may begin to take on the role of the deceased and idolize them in attempts to maintain their bond with the individual.

Ages 10-12 (Pre-Adolescent): Children in this age range attempt to understand both the facts associated with the death, as well as the emotions surrounding it. It can at times be difficult for these children to understand the emotional process of grief.

What can you expect to see?

- These children may appear indifferent, as they fear showing sad emotions will make them look weak to their peers.
- They may also demonstrate their grief through anger, irritability, moodiness, eating/sleeping pattern changes, withdrawal from friends, less attention to schoolwork, and even bullying behaviors. You may also see them express more physical complaints. Helping your child to find positive ways to express his/her feelings can help the grieving process (exercise, listening to calming music, writing/drawing, talking to others, etc.).
- Lastly, pre-adolescents may express concern for how life will go on successfully without the deceased individual.

HealthyChildren.org (n.d.). *How Children Understand Death & What You Should Say*. Retrieved from <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/How-Children-Understand-Death-What-You-Should-Say.aspx>

VITAS HealthCare (n.d.). *Children's Developmental Stages: Concepts of Death and Responses to Grief*. Retrieved from <https://www.vitas.com/resources/grief-and-bereavement/child-development-stages>