



What Children Understand About Death at Different Ages

BABIES AND TODDLERS

Even babies and very young children experience grief, though they express it differently. While they don't understand death, they do feel the loss of their primary caregiver. Around age two, children begin to recognize the absence of someone significant (such as a sibling or grandparent).

This can lead to inconsolable crying, anger about changes in routine, withdrawal, decreased interest in toys or food, and, as their language and motor skills develop, actively searching or calling for the person who has died.



TWO TO FIVE YEARS

Children at this stage are beginning to explore the idea of death, perhaps observing it in insects or animals or including it in their play. They understand the difference between living and death, but the concept of "forever" is still difficult to grasp. They may believe a deceased person will come back. They can ask a lot of questions around death such as 'what happens when people die?', 'do dead people wake up?'. Open and honest answers to their questions are essential for their understanding.

They are deeply affected by grief, both their own and that of those around them. Anxiety, especially separation anxiety, is common, as are changes in sleep and appetite, loss of interest in play, and regression in development (like language or toilet training). At this age, it is most important for the child to feel safe.



PRIMARY SCHOOL AGED CHILDREN

Between the ages of five and seven years, children gradually begin to develop an understanding that death is permanent and irreversible and that the person who has died will not return. They might be curious about what happens after death and have questions about grief. Children may also struggle with feelings of guilt, believing they somehow caused the death ('magical thinking'). Reassurance that it wasn't their fault is vital.

With age, children's understanding of death grows, encompassing more abstract and spiritual concepts. They may also begin to take on a caregiver role, concerned about the burden of their grief on surviving family members as well as an attempt to control the situation. Surrounding children with the love and support of family and friends is essential. Giving them space to share their feelings, whether through words or creative outlets, is also vital to their healing. Some children may act out or have trouble concentrating in school.



TEENAGERS

Teenagers are often concerned with their own identity and their position within their family and circle of friends. Being a bereaved young person can be very isolating, and the sense of vulnerability can interfere with their desire to be independent and grown up. Whilst they have an adult understanding of death, they will have their own beliefs and views and might challenge explanations offered by others.

Grieving teenagers often face conflicting urges. They might seek distraction in their hectic social life or struggle with apathy towards school and life in general. Supporting them means finding a delicate balance between offering comfort and respecting their need for independence.



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