



How Children and Teens Conceptualize Death and Dying

Infants to Age 2:

Although there is little understanding of death, children in this age category are extremely sensitive to their emotional surroundings. They sense change, moods, pain, etc. and may need to be held more and reassured in calm tones.

Ages 2-5

Children in this age category are also sensitive to their emotional surroundings and depend on routine. Magical thinking and concrete thinking are two main characteristics of these children. Magical thinking is the process wherein children believe that they have caused something to happen. Concrete thinking defines the concept wherein children hear exactly what is said and assign a meaning of their own. BE CAREFUL OF EUPHEMISMS such as “lost”, “passed away”, and “sleeping” when referring to the person who has died. Be honest when explaining death in simple terminology. For example, “Dead means that our body stops working and we don’t get cold or hungry anymore.” Death is not seen as a permanent thing for these children. Instead they see it as a reversible or temporary as in cartoons. They will ask the same questions over and over in order to reassure themselves of your honesty. Don’t be surprised if they expect the person who died to return.

Ages 6-9

These children have a better understanding of the permanency of death and like to feel included in the family conversations. Allow them to “do” things to express their grief; draw a picture or write a letter/poem that can be left at the grave or in the casket. They also may fear that someone else may die soon so reassurances and honest discussions are essential to comfort them.

Ages 9-12

Children in this age category are capable of more abstract thinking about death. Some of them are fascinated by the biology aspect of disease, death and dying. As with younger children they can feel responsible for the death. Reassurance is just as important for them. Their peers are starting to become important, so some children may choose not to share about a death experiences. They do not want to be “different” or feel embarrassed about details. In fact, they may resent the fact that their family has been changed and is not “normal” like all of their friends.

Adolescents/Teens

As adolescents begin to develop their own identity it is natural for them to push away family members. When a death occurs the reaction is no different. There is a real conflict between wanting to be involved with the family and yet needing their independence. They may find it difficult to find someone to confide in. There is a great sense of immortality and thus facing the reality of the death of a family member or friend is a very, very difficult task. Not wanting to be and/or feel different from their peers is very difficult. Give them reassurance by finding a way that is comfortable for them to communicate. Don't give up!

Remember that all children/adolescents/teens grieve differently...as adults do. They may not always fit into a certain category. Grief is a process that will be with them through many developmental stages. Listen, respect and validate their thoughts and feelings, no matter their age. Never assume you know what they are feeling by their actions and reactions. They need to tell you that in their own way and in their own time...over and over again.

The above information is a compilation of various thoughts and authors, regarding the way that children and adolescents grieve. Developmental age and functioning, environment and social skills all play a role in understanding death and dying and should be taken into account.