

Children's Understanding of Death: Early Childhood (4-7)¹

Concept of Death:

This age group may view death as temporary and reversible. “Magical thinking” can color the thoughts of kids this age, and they may think their actions or behaviors caused the death. They may believe one has control over avoiding death through their own actions. They also may make up their own ideas of what the death may be connected to (i.e. something specific that happened that day) if they do not understand what happened and why.

Grief Response:

Children this age may do a lot of repetitive questioning about the death and what happens after death. Often, they process their understanding through play, where they may act out the death or funeral. They may present as if completely unaffected because they are not yet able to process it, or they may present as angry, sad, or confused. Difficulty eating or sleeping can be responses. They may regress in their behaviors and require more attention or care. They may also have a lot of fears about other people in their lives dying or leaving them.

¹ Adapted from <https://www.vitas.com/family-and-caregiver-support/grief-and-bereavement/children-and-grief/childrens-developmental-stages-concepts-of-death-and-responses/>

Children's Understanding of Death: MIDDLE YEARS (7-10)²

Concept of Death:

This age group may want to see death as reversible but they begin to see it as both final and universal. They are very curious about the details of death, cremation and burial and may ask candid questions. Even though they know death can happen to anyone and that there are many things that cause death, they still do not typically think of death as something that can happen to them or people close to them, but instead to only old or very sick people. They may believe that they can escape from death through their own efforts. They also might view death as a punishment, particularly before age nine. Sometimes they are unable to comprehend how the death will affect their life, which can become a source of anxiety.

Grief Response:

Children in the middle years often become concerned with how others are responding to the death as they become less focused on themselves and more on others. They may fear that other loved ones will die as well. Sometimes they may become overly concerned about their own health and may fear bodily harm and death.

Everyone experiences grief differently and needs time to process feelings and emotions.

Some children may present as angry or sad, some may have a jocular attitude about death, appearing indifferent, or others may withdraw and hide their feelings. Other typical responses include shock, denial, depression, changes in eating and sleeping patterns, and regression to an earlier developmental stage.

This age group tends to have more coping strategies available than younger children and may fantasize how they would prevent the death from happening again as a way to gain control over the situation. Death is also play acted in children at this age, especially for those children who have difficulty expressing feelings verbally.

² Adapted from

<https://www.vitas.com/family-and-caregiver-support/grief-and-bereavement/children-and-grief/childrens-developmental-stages-concepts-of-death-and-responses/>

Pre-Adolescent Understanding of Death (10-12)

Concept of Death:

Pre-adolescents conceive of death in much the same way as children in the middle years, with a few additions. Pre-adolescents are in the process of establishing their own identities, gaining more independence from their parents and other adults, and creating stronger ties with their peer group. In understanding death, pre-adolescents attempt to understand both the biological AND emotional process of death. They are, however, more able to understand the facts surrounding the death of someone than they are the feelings surrounding the death.⁴

Grief Response:

It is common for pre-adolescents to want to cover their feelings and emotions so as not to appear “different” from their peer group. They fear that expressing sad feelings may be seen as a sign of weakness (particularly for boys). For this reason, they may seem removed and indifferent.

They also may express their grief uncharacteristically, such as through anger outbursts, irritability and bullying behavior. They may exhibit physical symptoms, moodiness, changes in sleeping and eating patterns, indifference toward schoolwork, or isolation from their peers. They might worry about practical issues after a death, such as how the household will survive without the deceased or how they personally will be taken care of. They also might have questions regarding religious and cultural beliefs about death.

⁴Theresa Huntley, *Helping Children Grieve* (Augsburg: Augsburg Fortress, 1991), p. 17

Providing Support to Your Child⁵:

Talk with your child, and encourage them to ask questions or voice concerns. Although you should monitor the level of graphic details you provide, be honest about what happened.

Model grief for your child. Express your own feelings and worries, as well as how you are coping with those feelings. Don't be afraid to talk about it, so it becomes normal for your child to express when they are thinking about it. However, allow your child to guide this process by not forcing them to engage in conversation if they are not ready. It's just as important for them to listen to you process.

It is okay to tell your child you don't know why something happened and to agree that it is not fair. Try to comfort them by sharing in their feelings, as opposed to telling them things that may or may not be true. Normalize whatever feelings they have, and don't be concerned if it seems they don't have much of a reaction at all.

Try to maintain as much of a normal routine as usual, including getting enough sleep. Kids thrive on routine and it can be very comforting. Additionally, for many kids, engaging in school or regular activities helps distract their minds and allows them a break from the sadness around them.

Provide opportunities for engaging in play, art, and writing to allow your child multiple outlets for processing.

As a parent, you are your child's most important emotional support. Do not hesitate to engage in counseling, or your own self-care/coping strategies in order to be in the best possible emotional state to support your child.

⁵Adapted from

http://virtualhospice.ca/en_US/Main+Site+Navigation/Home/Topics/Topics/Communication/Talking+with+children+and+youth+about+death.aspx

Literature for Kids:

What on Earth Do You Do When Someone Dies? by Trevor Romain

This book is set up in an easy-to-access question and answer format that covers a lot of important topics. You can pick and choose from among your child's questions, or just let them look through on their own. It includes some good ideas for processing grief.

Why Did You Die? By Erika Leeuwenburgh and Ellen Goldring

This activity-based workbook is meant for children to do with an adult. It begins with some information for parents about how children may experience grief, and recommendations around this. You can pick and choose activities you may want to do.

When Someone Very Special Dies: Children Can Learn to Cope with Grief by Marge Heegard

This book is set up so that the children illustrate the book as they read it, giving them a way to process. It talks about topics like change, feelings, sharing memories, and feeling better. It is simple, but effective in its explanations.

Literature for Parents:

Talking With Children About Loss by Maria Trozzi

This book isn't just focused on death, but rather on helping parents help children understand and grieve around a variety of difficult situations (death, moves, community tragedy, divorce, long-term illness, etc). Because of this, parents may find it useful in numerous circumstances.

Other Resources:

Joanna's Place is a great resource for kids going through any serious life stressors, and one of the services they offer is a free parent "talking points" consultation for how to talk to your kids about difficult things. You can reach them at 781.413.5141, e-mail at info@joannasplace.org, and their website is as follows:

<http://www.joannasplace.org/>

Should my child attend a funeral, wake or memorial service? Here is a link to a site that addresses that topic.

<https://www.vitas.com/family-and-caregiver-support/grief-and-bereavement/children-and-grief/guidelines-for-children-attending-funerals-and-memorial-services/>

Guidelines for helping grieving children

<https://www.vitas.com/family-and-caregiver-support/grief-and-bereavement/children-and-grief/guidelines-for-helping-grieving-children/>