

### Children/Adolescents and Grief

Children and adolescents look at death differently than adults do. Their understanding of death is based on their developmental level, family upbringing, cultural and religious background, and previous experience with death. Below are developmental considerations and guidelines. There may be overlap depending on individual child/adolescent.

**Preschoolers:** Preschool age children fear separation, but think it is temporary. During play, they may pretend that some living thing has died and bring it back to life. They need an explanation that the body has stopped working and won't start working again. They may be alarmed by the grief of adults around them. They need to be told something like "We are sad right now because we miss \_\_\_\_\_, but we are all going to be OK."

Concept of Death: It's reversible

Grief Response: Brief, intense

Signs of Distress: Regression

Interventions: Routines, play, stability

**4 to 6 years old:** These children may wonder why people have to die and often have hard time understanding death. They may think their angry thoughts or feelings may have caused/contributed to death. They need reassurance that they did nothing to cause it.

Concept of Death: May still think it's reversible

Grief Response: Verbal, questioning

Signs of Distress: Regression

Interventions: Talk, play

**6 to 9 years old:** Children in this age group are beginning to understand that death is final. If they have been taught about heaven or life after death, they may wonder why they can't go there to visit and come back. As these children approach nine years of age, they tend to ask more questions about life and death.

Concept of death: Finality, perhaps punishment

Grief Response: Specific questions

Signs of Distress: Regression

Interventions: Listen and answer questions, physical outlets, play

**9 to 11 years old:** These children may begin to understand the irreversibility of death. To them, death becomes real, final, and inevitable. They may show interest in the biological aspects of death and details of funeral.

Concept of Death: Conceptualize death

Grief Response: Specific questions, sadness, denial

Signs of Distress: Regression

Interventions: Listen and answer questions, encourage verbalization. Allow choices of creative outlets (art, music, writing, etc.)

**Adolescents (11-18 years old):** By about 12 years old, children can understand death about as well as an adult, but they are preoccupied with the present, with their relationships with peers, and with their own identity.

Concept of Death: Conceptualize

Grief Response: Sadness, denial

Signs of Distress: Suicidal thoughts/ideations

Interventions: Encourage verbalization, allow choices for creative outlets (art, music, physical activity, etc.), memorial activities as appropriate