

## Developmental Stages and Grief

Below is a description of a child's understanding of death and the possible reactions at various stages. The concept of death is an abstract one and therefore children of various ages have varying degrees of understanding about it.

### Preschool/Kindergarden (Ages 4-5):

At this age children see death as a type of "going to sleep" or some other temporary state. The concept of forever is beyond their capacity to understand and they may believe a dead person will return. This tendency is magnified when the child is told that the dead person is "just sleeping". They tend to connect events that don't belong connected (i.e., if you are old you will die).

#### Reactions may include:

<i>Escape into play</i>	<i>difficulty understanding abstract ideas</i>
<i>attachment to substitute people</i>	<i>like (heaven or "at peace")</i>
<i>giving up attachment to or</i>	<i>aggressiveness, tantrums, rage</i>
<i>preoccupation with the deceased</i>	<i>nightmares</i>
<i>idealizing the deceased</i>	<i>hyperactivity/nervousness</i>
<i>sadness</i>	<i>compulsiveness</i>
<i>longing</i>	<i>bewilderment</i>
<i>yearning</i>	<i>regression</i>

### Elementary School (Ages 6-10):

Children in this group have developed more cognitive skills and most are able to understand that death is final. The coping skills are still not well developed. Denial is the prime defense. Death is seen as something you "catch" (like the flu) or as something that "takes" you (like the bogeyman). This age group needs a more detailed explanation of why death occurred. They need to understand the difference between a fatal illness and just being sick. There is a tendency to think death can be avoided by being good or lucky. There is fear of loss of control. Inner feelings tend to be hidden. They need support and permission to grieve.

#### Reactions may include:

<i>Somatization (physical symptoms like a tummy ache or head ache)</i>	<i>Fantasizing that the deceased is actually alive</i>
<i>Hypochondria</i>	<i>Fear of death</i>
<i>Magical thinking with resulting fear or guilt</i>	<i>Fear of objects, persons or events related to death</i>
<i>Child believes death is caused by actions, thoughts or wishes</i>	<i>Fear of abandonment</i>
	<i>Trying to be like the deceased</i>
	<i>Aggressiveness</i>

# Developmental Stages and Grief, Cont.

## **Middle School (Ages 11-13)**

By now the child is beginning to understand and accept both the finality and the universality of death. He/she may still have questions about the biological aspects of death, but the questions have become more sophisticated (how is a body embalmed?). A new-adult understanding of death is developing, however the middle school aged child may be confused and self-conscious about emotions of grief. There may be a tendency not to express feelings. They may feel helpless and have a sense of lack of control

### **Reactions may include:**

<i>Realizing one's own mortality, yet a sense of being invincible</i> <i>Delayed grief reactions</i>	<i>Irritability</i> <i>Reluctance to discuss emotions</i> <i>Symbolic behavior</i>
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## **High School (Ages 14-18)**

Adolescents may have an adult understanding of death, but not without characteristic reactions. This is a period of shifting from dependence to independence. They tend to feel helpless and frightened. The yearning for the deceased may feel like a regression, and so may be avoided. They may be concerned about what is expected of them. They need support and understanding.

### **Reactions may include:**

<i>Sense of invincibility</i> <i>Denial of emotions</i> <i>Suppressed thinking about death</i> <i>Depression</i> <i>Somatic symptoms</i>	<i>A need to talk about death (must be someone with whom the adolescent feels comfortable)</i> <i>Anger</i> <i>Guilt</i>
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