

Children's Understanding of Death

Children and young people's understanding of death and responses to bereavement are likely to be based as much on their experience of life as on their chronological age. Each child is unique and these categories are a guide only.

0-2 Years

Children experience feelings of pain and loss. They will protest loudly and search repeatedly for the deceased. They need a consistent routine, cuddles and hugs and need to be told repeatedly that the person will not be returning. It is important that special memories and photographs are kept for the child as he/she grows older.

2-5 Years

Young children may be beginning to understand the concept of death, but do not appreciate it. They think in literal and concrete terms and so will be confused by euphemisms for death such as 'passed away', 'lost', 'gone to sleep'.

Children of this age may well require repeated explanations of what has happened. As their thinking is very much centred on themselves, they may consider that something they did or said caused the death. They are prone to fantasise at this age and, if not told what is happening, may dream up something scarier than reality. They need to be told that people die for a variety of reasons and not because of anything we say.

5-8 Years

At about five years of age most children are beginning to realise that dead people are different from those who are alive, that they do not feel, they cannot hear, see, smell, or speak, and they do not need to eat or drink. At around seven years of age the majority of children accept that death is permanent and that it can happen to anyone. This can result in separation anxiety. As they develop, they become more able to express their thoughts and feelings but they may conceal them and outwardly appear unaffected. They need to be given an opportunity to ask questions and to be given as much information as possible to allow them to adjust. They are likely to be very interested in the rituals surrounding death. Children at this age will often act out through play what is happening around them. They need questions answered openly, honestly and simply. It is also important to maintain consistent routine.

8-12 Years

At this age a young person's understanding of death almost matches that of an adult, although they find it difficult to grasp abstract concepts. They understand that death is

irreversible, universal and has a cause. An important factor is their deepening awareness of their own mortality. This can result in fear and insecurity. Their need to know details continues, and they will seek answers to very specific questions. They need the opportunity to talk to a trusted adult.

Adolescence

The struggle for independence at this age may cause bereaved teenagers to challenge the beliefs and expectations of others as to how they should be feeling or behaving. Death increases anxieties about the future and they may question the meaning of life and experience depression. Teenagers may find it easier to discuss their feelings with a sympathetic friend and find it difficult to seek help and support from adults. They may have difficulty coming to terms with their own mortality and that of those close to them; they may cope with this by denying the possibility of death by taking part in risk taking behaviour. Anger makes up a large part of their grief, often compounded by a sense of injustice.

Adolescence need choice with regard to the funeral and subsequent life changes while the same time they should not be burdened with adult responsibilities.

References

Child Bereavement UK (childbereavementuk.org)

Barnardo's Northern Ireland (barnardos.org.uk/childbereavementservice)