

Understanding Grieving Children - By Age Group

Age	Concept of Death	Grief Response	Developmental Stage/Task	Signs of Distress	Possible Interventions
2-4	Egocentric; believes world centers around them; narcissistic; no cognitive understanding; pre-conceptual; unable to grasp concepts	Seen as abandonment; seen as reversible, not permanent; common statements, "Did you know my daddy died?" "When will he be home?"	Intensive response but brief; very present oriented; most aware of altered patterns of care; repeated questions	Regression; changes in eating and sleeping patterns; bedwetting; general irritability and confusion	Short and honest interactions; frequent repetition; comforting, reassurance; nurturing; consistent routine.
4-7	Gaining sense of autonomy; exploring world outside of self; gaining language; fantasy thinking and wishing; initiative phase seeing self as initiator; concerns of guilt	Death still seen as reversible; great personification of death; feeling of responsibility because of wishes and thoughts; common statements, "It's my fault. I was mad at her and wished she'd die."	Verbalization; great concern with process; How? Why?; repetitive questioning; may act as though nothing has happened; general distress and confusion	Regression; nightmares; sleeping and eating disturbances; violent play; attempts to take on role of person who died	Symbolic play using drawings and stories; allow and encourage expression of energy and feelings through physical outlets; talk about it
7-11	Concrete thinking; self-confidence develops; beginning of socialization; development of cognitive ability; beginning of logical thinking	Death as punishment; fear of bodily harm and mutilation; this is a difficult transition period, still wanting to see death as reversible but beginning to see it as final	Specific questioning; desire for complete detail; concerned with how others are responding; What is the right way? How should they be responding?; starting to have ability to mourn and understand mourning	Regression; problems in school, withdrawal from friends; acting out; sleeping and eating disturbances; overwhelming concern with body; suicidal thoughts (desire to join one who died); role confusion	Answer questions; encourage expression of range of feelings; encourage and allow control; be available but allow time alone; symbolic play; allow for physical outlets; Talk about it
11-18	Formal operational problem solving; abstract thinking; integration of one's own personality	"ADULT" approach; ability to abstract; beginning to truly conceptualize death; work at making sense of teachings	Depression; denial; repression; more often willing to talk to people outside of family; traditional mourning	Depression; anger; anger toward parents; non-compliance; rejection of former teaching; role confusion; acting out	Encourage verbalization; do not take control; encourage self-motivation; listen; be available; do not attempt to take grief away

**Courtesy of the Dougy Center for Grieving Children*