

A CHILD'S CONCEPT OF DEATH

A unique characteristic of children is their insatiable appetite for answers to their questions. Children are especially interested in why death occurs and why it can't be "fixed".

INFANCY TO TODDLER YEARS

- There is no concept of death.
- The child reacts to the emotions and feelings of the parents.
- The grief of others permeates their environment.

REACTIONS

- Crying.
- Regurgitation or vomiting.
- Regression in toilet habits.

INTERVENTIONS

- Confront the behavior with professional help.
- Keep the routine as normal as possible.
- Physical reassurance through holding and talking to the child.

FROM THREE TO FIVE

- Children this age live mostly in the present.
- They deny death as a normal and final process.
- They equate death with sleep. In time, the person will awaken.
- Death is measured in degrees - "kind of" dead to "real" dead.
- They begin to form a vague understanding of what death is, but they believe it only happens to other people.

REACTIONS

- May show little concern when told of a death.
- May regress to infantile behavior.
- Fears separation from significant others.
- Asks repeated questions about the person who died.

INTERVENTIONS

- State the fact of death. Do not use clichés.
- Keep explanations short and simple.
- Respond to their security needs.

FROM SIX TO NINE

- They have a clearer understanding of death.
- Comprehend they, too, can die.
- Begin to fear death; often see it as punishment.
- Realize death is final and people they love can die.

REACTIONS

- High anxiety.
- Less willing to talk about death.
- Grief reactions ebb and flow.

INTERVENTIONS

- Respond compassionately.
- Refrain from using clichés.
- Be responsive to their needs.
- Reassurance.
- Use art and stories to aid their expression of grief.

FROM TEN TO TWELVE

- View death not only as final but inevitable.
- Curious about the biological aspects of death.
- To hide their fear, they often joke about death.
- Not unusual for them to feel some responsibility for the death.

REACTIONS

- Separation anxiety and fear.
- May lose some manual skills.
- Daydreaming. At school, grades may fall.
- This is the "fix it" age.
- They tend to emotionally distance themselves.

INTERVENTIONS

- Give compassionate answers to their questions.
- Give them permission to vent their feelings.
- Listen attentively.
- Give an honest explanation of the death.

TEENAGE YEARS

- More adult processes are evident.
- They fluctuate between acknowledging death as final and wanting to believe it is just a rumor.

- They have feelings of immortality at the same time realizing life is fragile.
- To defy death, they engage in risk taking behavior.

REACTIONS

- Assume the adult role, especially with younger siblings.
- Preoccupation with death.
- May attempt suicide as a gesture.
- Often show anger and aggression.

INTERVENTIONS

- Encourage communication.
- Involve a trusted friend.
- Engage in loving confrontation when needed.
- Provide professional help when necessary.



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