



How Do Children Understand Death?

A child's understanding of death depends on his or her age and stage of development.

From about ages 6 to 9, children may:

- Start grasping that death is final, not just a temporary separation, and the person (or pet) won't be coming back
- Believe death will never happen to them (or that they can prevent it by wishing or acting good, for example)
- See death as scary but as something that happens mostly to old people
- Picture death as a spirit, an angel, a ghost or a "boogeyman"
- View death as a punishment for – or result of – something they did
- Be very curious about death and ask many questions about it

From about age 9 on, children may:

- Understand better that death is final
- Accept that death happens to everyone
- View their own death as far in the future
- Realize that death is not connected to something they thought or did
- Understand the physical aspects of death
- Understand more abstract ideas, like a person living on in memory

Children may grieve a loss in new ways as they grow older.

This may happen because:

- They have new questions as their understanding of death changes
- Later losses, experiences or special events remind them about the loss

Keep in mind that every child is unique.

Children develop at different rates. Personality and other factors, such as typical responses to stress, can also affect how a child views and reacts to loss.

Do Children and Adults Grieve in the Same Way?

Children are children, not little adults. Their grief may at times look similar to adults, but a child's situation is different in many significant ways. Recognizing the differences in how adults and children grieve can help you be more in tune with the children you care for. The information given below will help you understand some of these differences and vulnerabilities.

A child's loss may disrupt basic developmental tasks. Those who have studied how children develop have found that children acquire various abilities and understandings during different time periods of their early life. Like building blocks laid to create a sturdy foundation these developmental blocks are how children learn to feel capable and safe as their lives unfold. Significant losses that happen during key periods of a child's life can change the stability of the child's foundation or disrupt how he or she thrives and grows.

Children are sensitive about being different. The intense thoughts and feelings of grief may make children feel different from their friends. They may be singled out by others and given special treatment and attention. Other children who are uncomfortable with the loss may ridicule or shun them.

Children have a limited ability to put their feelings into words. Young children often can't describe their fears or other strong feelings. Children depend on adults to teach them what words go with the feeling they have.

Children have limited tolerance for emotional pain. Children often grieve in brief but intense spurts. Their explosive or sudden outbursts may be alarming or unacceptable. They may disguise or cover up their feelings or distract themselves by withdrawing or pretending.

Children are quick to blame themselves. Children often think their thoughts or wishes made something happen. They may blame themselves for a loss, thinking they could/ should have done something to prevent the loss from happening. Children may lack the ability to correct such faulty thinking and may not ever say words to let you know they are feeling this way.

Young children may not understand that a loss is final, irreversible or certain. Their ability to grieve and grow through a loss may be delayed into later developmental periods.

Children lack experience and social skills. Like adults, children are more comfortable when they feel in control. Their outbursts and behaviors may surprise and embarrass them. They may behave so strongly that adults and friends respond to them with anger or punishment rather than calmness and comfort.

Children may sacrifice their personal needs. In a move to gain the approval of their parents or to make caregivers feel better or less concerned children often sacrifice or disown their feelings or their needs.

Some adults don't think a child's grief is real or important. Children have been called the forgotten grievers. Family members, teachers and neighbors may fail to validate a child's grief because they don't believe children are really affected by a loss.

Care-giving adults may lack patience or energy. Often when a child is grieving a loss so are their parents or care-giving adults. These adults may fail to recognize a child's grief. They may lack the patience and energy to attend to the child's needs.

Children and Grief

How do children grieve?

Children grieve differently than adults. They feel many of the same feelings, but they express their feelings in a different way. Adults often release emotions by crying and talking. Children tend to express their emotions through behavior and play. They also process most things in small doses and in short periods of time. It is normal to be sad for a while, and then jump up and start playing happily, only to be sad again some time later.

How should I explain death to my child?

Since death is a natural part of life, parents should talk to their children about the subject in a natural, conversational, factual style. The best education is an ongoing one. Answer questions as they arise. Do not try to hide your own emotions. However, do explain your tears so that your child does not think he or she is causing you to be sad. When talking about death, provide honest information. Teach your child that "dead" means not moving, not breathing, not seeing, not feeling and not being able to respond. Simply put, the person's body ceases to work. Keep the explanation simple, concrete and brief. Use the words, "dead," "die," and "death."

What if my child does not talk about death?

It may mean that the child is handling it in his or her own way. However, if children do not receive accurate, honest information about death, their imaginations will fill in the blanks. What they do not know can be scary. Do not assume children are not grieving if their behavior seems unchanged. It may mean the grief is too powerful for them to know how to express it.

How do I ease my child's fear of death?

Encourage children to talk and cry. Listen and reflect what they say without judgment. Let them see your own tears and know that it's okay to express their feelings. Avoid unnecessary changes. Structure and routine provide security as would a favorite bear, blanket or toy. Children may feel responsible for the death of a loved one, or be afraid that they or others whom they love might also die. Reassure them that they did not cause this to happen and that someone will always be there to care for them.

Should children attend the wake and funeral?

Children should not be forced to attend. If they wish to go, it can provide an excellent means of sharing the experience and allowing them to say "goodbye." You can prepare them for what they will encounter by offering a simple concrete explanation of what they will see and experience. Let them make the decision and be prepared to support them in it.

How do I help my child cope with death?

Children may express their grief through anger. Help them to talk about their feelings and find ways to channel their emotions through different activities such as recalling favorite stories of their loved one. Drawing, modeling with clay, making collages or putting things in a treasure box are all ways for them to cope with their loss. Older children might want to write a poem or letter, or keep a journal of their thoughts and feelings. They might want to create a memorial by planting a tree or lighting a candle. Listening to comforting music can also help children cope.

How Can I Tell If My Child Needs Counseling?

First of all, trust your instincts. If your gut feeling tells you a child needs additional support, work to get that help for him/ her. Any child that is grieving the death of a loved one can benefit from grief counseling. Having a person to support them through their grief journey makes a big difference. Many of the signs and symptoms of complicated grief are the same responses we see in normal grief. What makes these “red flags” is a matter of degree. Fear or anger, for example, are normal grief reactions. *Persistent* or *prolonged* fear or anger, however, is symptomatic of unmet mourning needs. If the child is progressing in his or her grief journey, reactions should soften in intensity and duration over time.

Signs of <u>Normal</u> Grief	Signs of <u>Complicated</u> Grief or Clinical Depression
- Usually connect depressed feelings to the death	- Often do not relate depressed feelings to any life event
- Disbelief, denial, shock	- Total denial of the reality of the death
- Often openly angry	- May suppress anger. May complain and be irritable, but may not directly express anger. May be persistently angry and hostile.
- Sense of unreality, withdrawal from others	- Consistent withdrawal from family and friends
- Disruption of typical behavior patterns or personality	- Prolonged change in behavior or personality
- Children respond to comfort and support	- Children often reject support
- Can still experience moments of enjoyment in life	- Often project a pervasive sense of doom
- Adults can sense sadness and emptiness in child	- Often projects a sense of hopelessness and chronic emptiness
- Often has transient physical complaints	- May have chronic physical complaints of actual medical illness
- May express guilt over some aspect of the loss	- Often have prolonged feelings of guilt over the death or generalized feelings of guilt
- Self-esteem temporarily impacted, but is intact	- Typically a deep loss of esteem. May use drugs and alcohol
	- Suicidal thoughts or actions

So once you determine a grieving child could benefit from counseling, how do you tell them? Talk to them with compassion and understanding. Many children and adults associate counseling as something for people who have something “wrong” with them. Assure the child that they are not crazy or abnormal. Explain that just as there are people like doctors and nurses who can help with physical pain, such as a broken arm, there are people that can help with the pain of grief.