# A Child's View of Death

These are broad outlines describing a child's perception of death. Children and adults grieve differently. As children grow and mature their understanding of death and human relationships change. At every developmental stage, children may need to re-grieve or re-experience their losses.

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<th>Developmental State (Age)</th>
<th>Child's Perception of Death</th>
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| Infant/ Toddler (birth-3 yrs) | • No understanding of death  
• Limited understanding of time | • Children sense when the adults around them are sad or preoccupied  
• May demonstrate an increased need for touching or holding  
• Increased separation anxiety  
• Somatic concerns, such as problems with feeding and/or digestion | • Offer abundant love  
• Meet their increased attachment needs, to include eye contact, loving facial expressions, touching, rocking, singing  
• Offer the child a transitional object, such as a soft blanket or stuffed animal |
| Preschool (3-5 yrs) | • Death seen as reversible or temporary  
• Children may think they are at fault  
• Children absorb only as much as they can understand  
• Confusion about what is real/not real  
• "Magical thinking" is common  
• Their understanding is very literal  
• Children at this age do not typically comprehend metaphor  
• Their emotions are difficult for them to understand and verbalize | • May act out or relieve anxiety through fantasy instead of talking to you  
• May feel at fault or guilty  
• May fear being left alone  
• Regressive behavior is common (may act as they did when they were younger, such as thumb sucking or bed wetting)  
• May not understand sadness around them  
• Repeated explanations may be needed  
• Behavioral changes common (may become withdrawn)  
• Will take breaks from grieving by resorting to playing | • Help child identify and understand own feelings  
• Accept regressive behavior  
• Reaffirm that the child is not at fault”  
• Help child grasp what's real and not real  
• "The body stop working" is a helpful first definition of death  
• Be clear that dying is not the same as sleeping  
• Reassure child that he/she will be cared for; demonstrate that care with closeness and love |
| School Age (6-7yrs) | • Beginning to see death as final, universal, but only for others ("not me")
• Neither believes nor denies that he/she will die
• May believe he/she can escape by being good or trying hard
• Death often viewed as an actual person, spirit, or being (such as the "boogey man") | • Feelings may be shared with you or held in and may be out of the child’s control
• Coping may take the form of gathering information, becoming an expert about the disease or condition
• May regress to a younger stage, earlier needs and actions
• Repeated explanations may be needed to help understanding
• May see changes in behavior: some children become aggressive, others withdraw. | • Allow child to talk or not talk as needed
• Answer questions honestly and concretely
• Respect their "need to know." Having information gives a child some sense of control
• Art and poetry are helpful outlets for emotional expression
• Work with child’s teachers at school to help grieving process and watch for isolation from classmates |
| School Age (7-11yrs) | • Understands death as permanent and irreversible
• Child may begin to question own mortality, asking “Am I next?”
• Vivid ideas of what occurs after death
• May be concerned with details of what happens after a person dies | • Feelings may be talked about, expressed or kept to themselves
• Regressive behavior common (including increased separation anxiety)
• Relationship with friends important
• May see changes in behavior and moods. Grades in school may suffer
• May take on role of person who died, seeking to “repair” the loss | • Support child’s style or coping
• Be available, supportive
• Acknowledge importance of friends
• Do not ask child to be strong, brave, grown-up, in-control, or to comfort others
• Help with good-byes
• Say “I don’t know” when you do not know the answers |
| Adolescent 12+yrs | • Full awareness of own mortality
• Attitudes toward death similar to adults
• Possible “survivor guilt” if sibling or friend dies
• Relationship with siblings and friends can be quite intense at this age | • Range of emotions may include anger, sorrow and guilt. Mood changes are common
• Expression of “might have been”, “Why?” And “If only”
• Increased reliance on peers
• Striving for independence, yet often fragile inside
• Grades and extracurricular activities may suffer | • “I’m here if you need me”
• Understanding that friends are important; find support groups if possible
• Respect adolescent’s need to work through independently
• Encourage journaling, diaries, art, and poetry as means of expressing strong emotions |

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