

Khululeka

grief support for children and youth

How Do Children Understand Death?

Experts suggest that understanding death involves understanding the concepts of irreversibility and finality. It has been said that before age 5, most children do not realize that all people, including themselves, will die. By ages 9 or 10, however, most children have developed an understanding of death as final, irreversible, and inescapable (Worden, 1996, pp. 10-11; NCVV, 2003).

Children's understanding of death at different ages:

1 – 12 months	Self-centred and only aware of me, here, now
12 – 18 months	Concept of permanence of objects and people and shows fear of separation
2 ½ - 5 years	Recognises death as absence and thinks of it as temporary and reversible. May ask questions like "when is mummy coming back?" Magical thinking and accepts stories
5 – 9 years	Recognises death as violent and permanent. Curious about death. Aware of taboos around death. Will play funerals. Will draw situations related to death, family, dying, sickness and funerals.
9 – 11 years	Death seen as inevitable and universal. Aware of their own vulnerability and that death includes them
Teenagers	This is a difficult time for most teenagers and to experience death of an important person at this time is felt more acutely when young people are trying to cope with the changing demands of their age. To be aware of the special needs of teenagers is very important to be alongside them in coping with their grief.

Recent research indicates that children already know more about death at a much younger age and are more capable of processing additional information than most adults find it comfortable to accept.

*Taken from the Child Bereavement Trust Manual
(February 2007) Cape Town*



Age appropriate responses to children who are grieving

Age	Reaction to loss	Behaviour and needs	Responses
Birth to 18 mths	<p>Disturbed sleep</p> <p>Changes in eating habits</p> <p>Clinginess to Caregiver</p> <p>Lethargy/listlessness</p>	<p>Nurturing care and protection</p> <p>Close relationship with primary caregivers</p> <p>Stable environment and consistent routines</p>	<p>Maintain a stable environment</p> <p>Keep a calm atmosphere</p> <p>Introduce changes gradually</p> <p>Minimise separation from primary caregiver</p>
18mths to 2 years	<p>Act out feelings</p> <p>Irritable, anxious, bewildered</p> <p>Regresses: sucks thumb, may wet bed, talks like a baby</p> <p>Needs lots of affection and approval</p> <p>Realises that person is not there</p> <p>Constantly asks for absent person</p> <p>Shows separation anxiety</p> <p>Becomes physically aggressive, hitting, bullying, pounding</p> <p>Refuses to sleep alone or in a dark room</p>	<p>Fears losing primary caregiver's love and attention</p> <p>Copes poorly with multiple changes</p> <p>Needs stability</p>	<p>Holding, caressing and cuddling</p> <p>Reassure child of your love</p> <p>Limit separation from primary caregiver</p> <p>Maintain routines</p> <p>Help child learn ways to release hostility and frustration</p> <p>Explain loss in simple terms</p> <p>Affirm that loss is not their fault</p>
3 to 6 years	<p>Regresses: wets bed, sucks thumb</p> <p>Irritable, aggressive, hostile</p> <p>Longs for absent person</p> <p>Has fears or anxieties not previously expressed</p> <p>Nightmares</p> <p>May have headaches or stomach aches</p> <p>Realises that family structure is different due to the death</p>	<p>Begins establishing self-identity (is separate from parents)</p> <p>Believes actions control others behaviour</p> <p>Identifies with opposite-sex parent</p> <p>Fears abandonment</p>	<p>Be attentive</p> <p>Reassure child that s/he is loved</p> <p>Cuddle often and be tender towards him/her</p> <p>Explain changes that have occurred in the family</p> <p>Help child to learn ways to release hostility and aggression</p>



Age	Reaction to loss	Behaviour and needs	Responses
7 to 10 years	<p>Blames self for loss of loved one</p> <p>Shows anger at family members, God or the world for not preventing the loss</p> <p>School work becomes weak</p> <p>Shows disruptive behaviour at home and school</p> <p>Self-image blurs</p> <p>Withdraws from activities or people</p> <p>Is sensitive to conflict</p> <p>Is fearful about the future and worries about money, food, shelter</p> <p>Understands that family is different and is self-conscious about it</p> <p>Shows an insatiable hunger for material goods like bicycles, clothes or money</p>	<p>Understand, support and show consistency</p> <p>Friends and self-image are important</p> <p>Defines self in relationship to others</p> <p>Strives for independence</p> <p>Seeks to be treated fairly</p>	<p>Discuss family situation with teachers</p> <p>Ask family and friends to give additional support</p>
11 to 13 years	<p>Withdraws from friends and activities</p> <p>Shows academic decline or indifference</p> <p>Displays negative behaviour like lying, stealing or cheating</p> <p>Has loss of identity and low self-esteem</p> <p>Feels powerless, insecure and vulnerable</p> <p>Often has excessive fatigue</p> <p>Has headaches and stomach-aches</p> <p>Shows extreme anger</p> <p>Is depressed and lonely</p>	<p>Wants to be accepted and respected</p> <p>Seeks autonomy</p> <p>Assumes more responsibility for self</p> <p>Struggles to establish a personal identity</p> <p>Has a fragile sense of self</p> <p>Considers peers more important than adults</p> <p>Resents monitoring by parents or caregivers</p>	<p>Encourage communication</p> <p>Set aside special times to talk and listen</p> <p>Answer questions posed</p> <p>Teach positive coping methods</p> <p>Affirm feelings</p> <p>Encourage healthy adult friendships with teacher, youth-club leader or community leaders</p> <p>Allow more personal freedom</p> <p>Ensure the home setting is inviting and comfortable.</p>

