

Responses of Different Age Groups

Children's understanding of death will vary according to their age and stage of development. They do not always have the vocabulary to describe their feelings, which may include sadness, shock, anger, confusion, loneliness, guilt, fear, regret etc. They may instead show how they feel through their behaviour.

Pre-school children

- Whilst babies are too young to understand the concept of death, they will:
- miss people with whom they had an attachment
- pick up on the emotional distress and moods of those around them
- be aware of and unsettled by changes to their routine

Toddlers and small children may:

- have a clearer sense that someone is missing but are not able to understand the permanence of death
- expect the person who has died to return and may search for them
- ask very direct questions and be interested in morbid details
- keep asking the same questions to try to make sense of their confusion
- have disrupted eating & sleeping patterns
- regress in their behaviour for a period of time
- become anxious when they are separated from their main carer
- initially find it difficult to start school
- express their feelings through their play

Children in this age group need:

- physical comfort
- consistency of care
- to keep to routines
- to avoid new changes where possible
- to be given simple explanations and honest answers to their questions

Primary School Children

Children in this age group can:

- start to understand the permanency of death
- experience anxiety about their future care, their own survival and the survival of other family members
- feel anxiety when they are separated from their main carer
- think that something they said or did caused the person to die
- regress in their behaviour for a period of time
- find it hard to concentrate at school / fall out with friends
- have difficulty getting to sleep / interrupted sleep / nightmares
- develop physical complaints e.g. tummy aches, headaches etc.
- have angry outbursts or cry unexpectedly
- only sustain their grief for short periods of time

Children in this age group need:

- reassurance
- affection
- to be given clear, age appropriate information
- to be offered honest answers to their questions
- plenty of chances to express and validate their feelings, e.g. 'It is unfair/sad' etc
- lots of opportunities to play!

Secondary School Children

Children in this age group are able to understand the implications of death and may:

- ask fewer questions
- be reluctant to open up
- want to grieve in private or with their peers
- show changes in relationships with their friends
- feel a range of feelings including shock, disbelief, sadness, anger, guilt
- fear they or others close to them will die
- feel the pressure to take on an adult role
- regress in their behaviour
- have physical complaints or become depressed
- develop school related difficulties
- increase risk-taking behaviours
- question religious, spiritual or existential beliefs

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They need:

- the support of adults
- honest answers to their questions
- reassurance
- opportunities to talk about who has died and how they are feeling, without being pressured.

They may benefit from talking to an outside professional to have their feelings validated. Please see our 'Bereaved Teenagers' information sheet for more tailored advice about supporting a young person in this age group

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