

## Developmental Understanding of Death and Grief

Like adults, each young person's grief is both a common and an individual experience. There are components that other young people may share, but no young person's grief is exactly like another's. Understanding is affected by personality, experiences, cognitive ability, spiritual beliefs, culture, exposure to media, previous experiences with death and developmental age. Below are general guidelines of developmental understanding and of common responses of young people faced with the experiences of death and grief. It is unlikely a child's behavior will fit neatly within the description for their age. Children often surprise us, sometimes with words that seem more or less mature than we expect of them. The descriptions below can serve as a guide for adults when trying to find words to explain death and grief to young people.

### Infant to Age Three

Do not comprehend the permanency of death. They are learning the concept of permanence and evidence this learning by their love of peek-a-boo, blowing out a candle, switching lights off and on and watching water run down a drain.

- React to feelings of those around them.
- React to changes in their schedules.
- Those closer to age three may ask questions over and over.

### Three to Six Years of Age

May use the words die or dead but not all will understand the permanency of death. They may seem to understand well one day and seem to be very confused the next day.

- Understanding is very concrete and words are interpreted literally so caregivers should be careful with their words. For example, if the child is told the person who has died is sleeping in heaven, they may develop a fear of going to sleep.
- May have numerous questions about what death is like: How will he eat or drink? Is she sleeping? Where will she go to the bathroom?
- Magical thinking may cause them to link non related events or their behavior with the cause of death or the sadness around them.
- Their concept of death may be influenced by what they have seen on TV or in movies.
- This can be confusing or scary because they are still in the process of understanding what is real and what is fantasy.
- May feel they are to blame somehow for what is happening around them, even the death. Children this age are just learning to separate how they feel from how others feel around them.
- May become fearful to be separated from the adults who care for them.

### Six to Ten Years of Age

Growing consciousness of own death and of death of people who take care of them.

- Understand the finality of death and are developing personal spiritual beliefs.
- May over-generalize causes of death in efforts to explain or protect. For example, "If jet planes didn't fly, people wouldn't die," or "People that go to the hospital die."
- May associate death with ghosts, witches, monsters, or other depictions in movies or stories.

### Ten to Thirteen Years of Age

Questions may be practical in nature such as, "What will happen to our family now?" "Who will take care of Mom now that Dad is gone?" "Will we have to move?"

- A more developed sense of responsibility may cause guilt, anxiety, a need to control or frustration and blame at the unfairness of a circumstance.
- Ability to form and accept more abstract beliefs spiritually and culturally.
- May experience intense emotion and search for meaning.

### Thirteen Years of Age to Young Adult

Demonstration of emotion tends to be intense and there may be difficulty putting circumstances into perspective.

- Good understanding of concepts of death, grief and impact on themselves and others.
- Seeking out others for support, especially peers.
- May prompt philosophical questions such as, "Who am I?" "What do I want to do with my life?" "What gives life meaning?" "What is the sense of living if we all die?"

### A few common responses of young people of all ages . . .

- Regression to a younger age for awhile.
- Being more sensitive.
- Becoming angered more easily.
- Having trouble concentrating.
- Having trouble sleeping or eating.
- Fearing their own death or the death of other adults in their lives.
- Compartmentalizing their emotions, demonstrating at times a lack of emotional response and at other times an intense emotional response.

#### Resource Bibliography

Huntley, Theresa. *Helping Children Grieve*, 2002. Augsburg Books: Minneapolis, MN.  
Wolfelt, Alan. *A Child's View of Grief*, 1991. Companion Press: Fort Collins, CO.

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