

Understanding Children's Grief and Developmental Stages

Age	Concepts and Beliefs	Grief Response	Emotions/Behaviors	Signs of Distress	How to Help
Birth-2 years	No understanding of death. Sees it as reversible—not permanent Aware of absence of loved one Notices changes in routine, family emotions, etc.	Misses contact, sounds, smell, and sight Anxiety Fears of being abandoned Looking for the person who died	Crying Sickliness Clingy Throwing Sucking, biting Sleeplessness	Physical changes: Weight loss Quiet, less responsive	Keep routines and activities as consistent as possible Physical comfort—hold and cuddle them Speak/Behave calmly and gently Provide items of comfort, such as stuffed animal, soft blanket
3-5 years	Death as reversible, not permanent To be dead is to be sleeping/away May wonder what will happen if the other parent dies Magical thinking and fantasies—often worse than reality	Intense, but brief response Most aware of changes in routine and care Interested in dead things Acts as if death never happened Looking for the person who died	Plays out scenes of death, change & feelings Physical complaints Sadness/Crying Irritability/Fighting Fear/Worry Insecurity Confusion	Regression: Eating and sleeping disorders Bedwetting	Keep routines and activities as consistent as possible Reassure them—they are safe/cared for Provide physical comfort, hugs Speak/Behave calmly and gently around them Let them know you are sad and that it's ok to be sad—start identifying feelings Encourage play
5-8 years	May still see death as reversible, but beginning to grasp concept of finality May see death as a punishment Think his/her thoughts/actions caused the death Forming spiritual concepts	Repetitive questioning May focus on process How? Why? Intense responses mixed w/acting as if nothing happened	Crying/Sadness Anger/Irritability Loneliness Withdrawn Worry/Anxiety/Fear Confusion Guilt	Regression: Nightmares, sleeping and eating disturbances Violent play	Keep routine/activities as consistent as possible Reassure them/Provide physical comfort Allow questions and answer honestly Speak/Behave calmly around them Provide opportunities for decision-making Let them know you are sad and that it's ok to be sad—start identifying feelings Encourage play/Expressive outlets
8-11 years	Understand that death is permanent Starting to think about future impact Focus on the biology/ what happens to the body when you die Concerns that their thoughts or actions caused the death Forming spiritual concepts	Specific questions and desire for details Concerned with how others are responding/how they should Talks about physical aspects of illness or death	Shock/Confusion Sadness Anger/Irritability Loneliness/Abandonment Fear/Anxiety/Guilt Concentration difficulties Nightmares/Sleep changes	Regressive behaviors & fluctuating moods Aggressive acting out Withdrawal/Isolation Extreme changes in academics/grades Suicidal thought/Self-harm	Allow questions and answer questions honestly Regular reassurance both verbally and through physical comfort Connect them with another trusted adult, when needed Honest communication/validation of emotions
12 years and up (teens)	Understands that death is final and universal High death awareness (may happen again) Concerns of own impending death May utilize spiritual concepts to cope Conflict between independence and dependence Need to have control of feelings Words/actions may have caused the death	Increased risk-taking Attempts to take on caregiver role More often willing to talk to others outside of family Adult approach Traditional mourning Highly self-conscious about being different from peers due to grief	Shock/Confusion Sadness/Crying Anger/Irritability Loneliness/Abandonment Fear/Anxiety Guilt Changes in sleeping/eating Changes in peer group Mood swings Physical complaints	Thoughts of suicide/self-harm Impulsive/Risk-taking behaviors—drugs, alcohol Aggressive acting out/non-compliance Extreme changes in academics/grades Isolation/withdrawal Depression	Be honest and encourage open communication Be willing to listen and acknowledge emotions Offer frequent reassurance Connect them with a trusted adult, or supportive peer group Normalize grief process Avoid expectation of adult responsibility Let them help plan funeral/memorial services; provide opportunity to remember the loss Encourage healthy, creative outlets