

# Developmental Stages and Children's Response to Grief

Approximate Developmental Age	Grief Reactions	Helpful Approaches
<u>Infant-2 years</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• change may upset the secure world of the child</li><li>• respond with irritability</li><li>• variations in crying or eating patterns</li><li>• bowel, bladder</li><li>• disturbances</li><li>• sleeplessness</li><li>• regression (ie: slept through the night prior to the death)</li><li>• fear of abandonment (begins at 1 year)</li><li>• child responds to parental grief</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• a consistent, nurturing figure</li><li>• if appropriate, include in funeral rituals</li><li>• fathers need guidance in dealing with the emotional needs of the infant after the death of the mother</li></ul>
<u>Ages 2-5</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• confusion</li><li>• separation anxiety--fear that if they are separated from parent, harm will come to them, therefore child becomes clingy, needs excessive attention, can't sleep alone, unable to concentrate on activities</li><li>• some children then become withdrawn, apathetic, depressed</li><li>• frightening dreams, agitation at night</li><li>• regression: to a behavior that had been given up prior to the death (ie: bed wetting, thumb sucking)</li><li>• child often understands that a profound event has occurred (ie: parent crying often, people in their home)</li><li>• child's understanding of death is limited</li><li>• may not believe that death is final (death is like a journey--you go away and then you come back)</li><li>• death seems reversible, one moment you're here then you're not, death and life seem interchangeable</li><li>• may seem unaffected in their play</li><li>• repeated questioning</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• simple honest words and phrases</li><li>• emphasize again and again in words that they can understand, that death is permanent</li><li>• listen to children's thoughts, questions, concerns, images and experiences</li><li>• explain that death is not a punishment and that they didn't cause the death</li><li>• when words fail, just listen, you don't have to have answers, let children explore</li></ul>

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Ages 5-8

- wants to understand about death in a concrete way, but thinks this "won't happen to them"
- denial, anger, disoriented, confused, puzzled, frustrated
- may behave as though nothing has happened
- may look unaffected, child is trying to defend herself against the death by pretending it hasn't happened
- desire to conform with peers (ie: pretend that parent is alive, at work, away on a trip)
- may ask questions repeatedly
- may need physical activity on a regular basis (even in the support group setting)

- children cope best when they receive simple, honest and accurate information
- look for confused thinking (ie: my mom died because of the strong medicine)
- offer physical outlets (ie: punching bags, boxing gloves)
- reassurance about the future and the surviving parent
- drawing, reading a book on other families dealing with death
- include in funeral rituals

Ages 8-12

- able to formulate realistic concepts
- finality of death is understood
- death is universal, an inevitable experience that can happen to everyone--including the child
- death as the end of life is a very frightening and painful event to them
- conception of death as magical, life-renewing, is replaced by the belief that death is terminal and fearsome
- leads to morbid curiosity, phobic behavior
- searching for their own philosophies of life and death
- difficulty concentrating

- answer questions directly and honestly--children need trust and truth
- avoidance simply creates further anxiety
- the difficult reality is better than uncertainty
- offer physical outlets
- create opportunity to talk as a family
- reassurance about the future and the surviving parent
- drawing, reading a book on other families dealing with death
- include in funeral rituals

Adolescents

- shock, denial, anxiety, distress, anger depression
- difficulty in concentrating
- exhibit a decline in quality of schoolwork
- become withdrawn and isolated from family and friends

- may react similar to adults, but have less coping mechanisms
- may feel vulnerable and need to talk
- include in funeral rituals
- ask about who they are talking to (most adults)

- seem persistently angry, sad
- physical complaints, constant fatigue & frequent drowsiness
- unresolved grief may be reflected in drug or alcohol abuse, impulsive behavior, and increased risk-taking
- instead of controlling their moods, their moods control them
- searching for their own identity, trying to separate from parents
- difficult to do this after a parent has died (ie: child who has had a fight with parent before they died, is then left with the guilt)
- the need to protect, take care of surviving parent

assume they are talking to peers about the death and most peers believe that they are talking to their family about the death); often they are not discussing the death and their feelings with either one--the more they are encouraged to share their grief the more likely they will be better able to cope with the loss in their life

**Grief Indicators (listed alphabetically, not by priority)**

**Physical or Behavioral**

- accident proneness
- alcohol, drug abuse
- appetite changes
- constipation
- diarrhea
- dizziness
- hives
- insomnia
- low energy
- nausea (recurrent)
- overeating
- stomach aches
- \*weakness (especially in legs)
- \*weight gain
- weight loss

**Emotional or Social**

- \*agitation
- \*anger
- \*anxiousness
- asthma
- compliance
- \*critical of self
- depression
- \*exaggerated positive behavior
- \*guilt feelings
- \*irritability
- jealousy
- \*loss of self esteem
- \*moodiness
- \*nightmares
- past oriented
- \*restlessness
- \*sadness
- thoughts of death, suicide
- withdrawal from relationships

**Intellectual**

- \*confusion
- inability to concentrate
- \*disbelief
- forgetfulness
- inattention
- memory loss
- over achievement

(\*OUR HOUSE has found these to be the most common grief indicators )