

Children's Understanding of Death

It is important to talk about death in a language children will understand. Children need information, but giving them more than they can understand is not helpful. To get a better understanding of what they already know about death, ask the child questions. The following is a brief guide to children's development stages and reactions to death.

Under two years, a child is likely to:

- Not yet understand what death is
- Sense feelings of adults
- Depend on nonverbal communications; need physical care, affection, and reassurances
- Sense feelings of adults

Three to five years, a child is likely to:

- View death as being temporary
- Question the cause of death
- Feel that the loss is a punishment
- Have difficulty handling abstractions such as heaven
- Feel sadness, but it may be short-lived
- Regress
- Increase aggression
- Idealize the lost person
- Give up attachment to a loved one and attach to substitute people (teachers, neighbors, etc.)
- Escape into play at times to relieve the reality of the loss; seems not to be reacting to the loss
- Have limited memories of the deceased
- Need reassurance, love, care, honesty, daily routine and structure to life

Five to nine years, a child is likely to:

- Begin to conceive of finality of death
- Have a fear of death, of others dying

Nine to twelve years, a child is likely to:

- Recognize irreversible nature of death
- Be troubled about own death

- Feel anger, guilt, blame themselves
- Have difficulty expressing feelings through words
- Express feelings through behavior
- Exhibit compulsive caregiving and good behavior, or demonstrate aggressiveness as a defense against feeling helpless
- Ask concrete questions
- Identify with deceased person as a means of staying connected to that person
- Still have difficulty comprehending abstractions such as heaven

- Have somatic systems
- Question religious beliefs

Twelve to eighteen, a child is likely to:

- Not want to talk or think about it
- Have fears of future
- Hide feelings or be very willing to talk about their feelings
- Gravitate towards their peers for support
- Feel anger, repress sadness or become depressed

How to Help Grieving Children

- Explain death in a simple and concrete way. Avoid euphemisms such as “passed away”, “lost”, “moved on”.
- Provide only as much information as makes sense for the child’s age (for example, be concrete and simple for a young elementary age child, where you can provide more information to a middle or high school age child.)
- Maintain structure and routine as much as possible, but be flexible when needed.
- Answer any questions honestly, including being truthful about things you don’t know. Expect repetitive questions. Provide opportunity for play and distraction.
- Offer physical and emotional nurturance.

Books for Children on Understanding Dying, Death, and Traumatic Grief

[The Tenth Good Thing About Barney](#)

By: Judith Viorst
Age level: 6+

[When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death](#)

By: Laurie Krasny Brown and Marc Brown
Age level: 6+

[The Goodbye Book](#)

By: Todd Parr
Age level: Preschool and Up

[Tear Soup](#)

By: Pat Schwiebert and Chuck DeKlyen
Age level: 8+

[I Miss You: A First Look at Death](#)

By: Pat Thomas
Age level: Preschool and Up

[The Fall of Freddie the Leaf: A Story of Life for all Ages](#)

By: Leo Buscaglia, Ph.D.
Age level: All ages

Additional Resources

[The Dougy Center](#)

Dougy.org

[Compassionate Friends](#)

Compassionatefriends.org
Local chapters, including support groups for parents available

[When Families Grieve Kit](#)

By: Sesame Street
Kit includes: A Sesame Street DVD, A Guide for Parents and Caregivers, A Children's Story