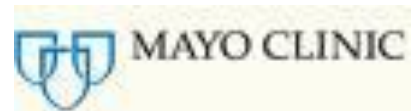


Parent/caregivers Guide to Help Children of all Ages Understand Death



Information Provided by:





Birth to Age 3

How a Child Understands Death:

Children view death as a loss, separation or abandonment. Infants/toddlers sense sadness or anxiety around them

- Impacted by the response of living caregivers and significant others around them

Possible responses/behaviors:

- May exhibit changes in sleeping, eating and mood, i.e. increased clinging, decreased appetite, more irritable

How to help:

- Keep normal routine when possible
- Provide consistent nurturing by parent or other caregivers



Ages 3 to 6

How a child understands death:

Children view death as reversible and temporary and believe that people who die will come back

- May believe in magical thinking: their thoughts, actions or feelings may have caused the death or that death is punishment for doing something bad
- May interpret words literally, i.e. my daddy died from a stomachache, I have a stomachache, maybe I will die too.
- Impacted by emotions of others around them
- Abstract concepts, such as heaven, may be difficult to understand

Possible responses/behaviors:

- Children may revert to an earlier stage of development, i.e. bed wetting, baby talk, fear of the dark
- May seem unaffected by the death
- May exhibit changes in sleeping, eating, mood and behavior
- May have difficulty separating from parents or other caregivers
- May escape through play
- May need to talk repeatedly about the death to make it seem real

How to help:

- Be honest, use concrete terms to describe death, i.e. dead, has died, dead people no longer breathe, eat, go to the bathroom or grow
- Avoid words such as sleeping, resting, lost, passed away or taking a trip
- Keep normal routine when possible
- Repeat simple, honest, explanations when asked for information
- Use books on death and loss to aid understanding
- Provide opportunities to play, draw, express feelings
- Offer reassurance that nothing the child did, said, or thought caused the death to happen
- Prepare them for what to expect relating to good-bye rituals, i.e. funeral, visitors
- Inform school personnel of death



Ages 6 to 9

How a child understands death:

Children begin to view death as final

- May think that death is something that takes people away or is contagious
- Increased curiosity about illness, death and how it affects the body
- Worries about how the dead person eats, sleeps, etc.
- May blame self for death and experience guilt feelings
- Children see death as accidental or something that happens to old people, but not to them

Possible responses/behaviors:

- May have difficulty separating from family members or caregivers
- May exhibit changes in behavior, i.e. increased aggression or physical symptoms
- May have difficulty expressing feelings verbally
- May have difficulty at school, i.e. changes in peer interaction, grades, trouble paying attention

How to help:

- Be honest, use concrete terms to describe death such as dead, has died, dead people no longer breathe, eat, go to the bathroom, or grow
- Avoid words such as sleeping, resting, lost, passed away or taking a trip
- Provide permission to cry and to share thoughts and feelings
- Identify specific fears or misconceptions (i.e. they can't catch the disease) and address potential guilt feelings (i.e. nothing they did caused the disease)
- Provide opportunities to play, draw, and journal
- Create opportunities to share positive memories about the dead person
- Maintain daily routines when possible, i.e. school
- Inform the child about who will help to meet his/her needs, i.e. social activities, caregiving
- Inform school personnel of death
- Encourage participation in good-bye rituals



Ages 9 to 12

How a child understands death:

Children are more aware of the finality of death and their own mortality

- Concerned about how the loss will impact them
- Understand that they too will die
- Interested in the biological aspects of death and details surrounding good-bye rituals
- Able to think in abstract terms, i.e. may have questions about an afterlife

Possible responses/behaviors:

- May be reluctant to share initially, but later have a strong grief reaction
- May be angry and direct anger at a variety of people, i.e. parents, siblings, peers, the person who died
- May exhibit a wide range of emotions such as shock, denial, anxiety, fear, depression or withdrawal
- May exhibit changes in behavior at home or in school, i.e. acting out or physical symptoms
- May become more interested in spiritual rituals

Ages 9-12 (continued)

How to help:

- Be honest, use concrete terms to describe death, such as dead or has died
- Provide and encourage discussion and opportunities for expression
- Be available, but respectful of need for privacy
- Offer reassurance that it is okay to cry as a way to express grief
- Model healthy coping behaviors, i.e. maintaining activities and routines
- Create opportunities to share positive memories about the dead person
- Inform school personnel of death
- Encourage participation in good-bye rituals



Adolescents

Understanding of death:

Adolescents have an adult understanding of death as inevitable, universal and irreversible.

- May feel confused, responsible, helpless, angry, lonely, afraid or guilty, may repress sadness
- Sees self as invincible; it will not happen to me
- Fully understands the implications of death and acknowledges life is fragile
- Questions the meaning of life and spiritual/religious beliefs

Possible responses/behaviors:

- May engage in risk taking behaviors, i.e. driving fast, using drugs and alcohol, sexually acting out
- May need permission to grieve but choose to grieve with his/her peers, not adults
- Increased criticism of adult caregivers
- May want to assume more of an adult role

How to help:

- Provide opportunities for open and honest discussion
- Don't assume adolescents can handle their problems without help or support
- Be available, but respectful of need for privacy
- Help them identify peers or other trusted adults with whom they can share their thoughts and feelings
- Discuss changes that may occur in the family structure
- Model healthy coping behaviors, i.e. maintaining activities and routines
- Inform school personnel of death
- Encourage participation in good-bye rituals

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