

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF UNDERSTANDING DEATH

This is a general guideline in reference to the differences between ages and stages of how children perceive and understand death. Of course, maturity and differences in cognitive development will influence the stage in which the child is functioning. Remember, this is just a guideline.

UNDER 3 (preverbal)

- o No language to attach to thoughts/experience
- o Greatest need is for immediate bonding to new support.

AGES 3 - 6 (magical thinking)

- o May believe s/he caused the death by magic.
- o Associate death w/ concurrent events/places. (Grandma died in the hospital, so everyone who goes into the hospital will die there.)
- o Experience grief in heavy but brief spurts.
- o Denies death as final process (Mom will come back for my birthday).
- o Often forgets person has died.
- o Fears loss and abandonment by remaining parent.
- o Sees death as change in state or gradual process (a leaf may be "more dead" than a toaster).
- o Usually has few fears about pain/distress for the deceased.
- o May not be open to reason or fact about the cause of the death. At this age they often "determine" facts for themselves.
- o See death as caused by external forces (retaliation, strife).

AGES 6 - 9 (concrete reasoning)

- o Tend to personify death (death dropper, angel of death).
- o Superstitious, lots of ghost stories (chants, oaths).
- o Associate death with non-movement (the dead can't talk, move, walk).
- o Begin to explore concepts of death relative to family ("Some day my mom will die.")
- o May experience sadness in anticipation of deaths which are not "rationally" imminent.
- o Believe it will happen to others, not themselves.
- o Are moving away from magical thinking toward grasping concepts of finality and irreversibility.
- o Around 6, may have fascination with death, killing.
- o Around 8, may have morbid fascination with death rituals, also dreams of death and resurrection.
- o Material facts around death may seem funny.

AGES 9 - 12 (abstract thinking)

1. More realistic sense of death -- often pervasive fear of it.
2. Feel death is sudden and unpredictable.
3. Begin to realize universality of death.
4. Fear of "the void" following death -- inanimate suspension.
Fear of painful death, poisoning, falling.

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF UNDERSTANDING DEATH (continued)

AGES 13 – 19 YEARS

1. Discussion about critical events becomes the primary means of processing grief.
 - Expect the thoughts and feelings of the teen to be contradictory and inconsistent.
 - As adults, be honest in your own grieving and share in the discussions of the teen, when invited.
 - Encourage peer support that may not include you.
 - Expect that a critical event in a teen's life will stimulate the teen to ponder larger issues, such as the meaning of life.
2. Teens may become highly self-conscious about being different due to the grief.
 - Allow for their defensive behavior in covering up their grief, if it is basically harmless to themselves or others.
3. Teens are self-centered and thus have an exaggerated sense of their own role in regard to the death.
 - Expect that teens will feel unrealistically responsible for the death, significant to the deceased, or vulnerable themselves to death.
 - Expect that teens will express their anxiety over the death by being reckless with their own life to prove that they are not vulnerable.
4. Teens may fight their vulnerability in grief because it may cause them to feel more dependant on their family at a time when they are striving for independence.
 - Expect that a teen may reject his/her parents one moment and appear childlike/in need in another. Tolerate this inconsistency without accepting abuse.
 - Encourage relationships with other supportive adults.
5. Teens are affected physically by the grieving process, especially in their sleep and eating patterns.
 - Expect periods of high energized activity or prolonged sleeping and inactivity.
 - Watch for drug and alcohol abuse.

- Grief needs a witness
- There are no rules for grieving
- The more comfortable we are with our own losses and grief, the more comfortable we will be with those in grief.

Things that helped me with my grief and lessons for helping others with theirs:

BEING ACKNOWLEDGED

- What meant the most was knowing people were thinking of me. Friends came to the house, the funeral home, and the memorial service, or just called. They sent flowers or cards, brought food even if I didn't ask. Say "I'm sorry" it's simple and direct.

WORKING

- Sometimes it is a relief to stay busy and focus on things to do. You might keep a list of things that need to be done. It can help to maintain a familiar 'routine.'

HELPING

- Helping others helped me feel better.

SHARING

- When a friend told me about a similar loss I didn't feel so alone, but don't assume you "know how I feel."

TALKING

- When I felt like talking about the person who died, I was grateful to friends who weren't afraid to listen and share, and let me tell my story over and over. Don't be afraid to mention the dead person's name. Listen!!! It's the best thing you can give.

CRYING

- Crying is a normal part of grief. Crying loosens the knots that get tied up inside us. Jana Stanfield has a song that says tears make more room for joy.

HUGGING

- A hug from a friend often made me happier and meant more than anything they could say. Actions often Do speak louder than words.

BEING WITH FRIENDS

- I liked it when friends asked me to do things with them in the same, old normal ways. I liked it when they came to the house, and when they took me away. Keep in touch!

TIME ALONE

- When I felt like it. Do what makes you feel better and don't wonder whether you are feeling or doing the "right things." Ask the person- do you want to be alone or not?