

Grief Ages and Stages

Age 3-6 years

At this age children see death as a kind of sleep; the person is alive, but only in a limited way. The child cannot fully separate death from life. Children may think that the person is still living, even though he or she might have been buried, and ask questions about the deceased (for example, how does the deceased eat, go to the toilet, breathe, or play?). Young children know that death occurs physically, but think it is temporary, reversible, and not final. The child's concept of death may involve magical thinking. For example, the child may think that his or her thoughts can cause another person to become sick or die. Grieving children under 5 may have trouble eating, sleeping, and controlling bladder and bowel functions.

Age 6-9 years

Children at this age are commonly very curious about death, and may ask questions about what happens to one's body when it dies. Death is thought of as a person or spirit separate from the person who was alive, such as a skeleton, ghost, angel of death, or bogeyman. They may see death as final and frightening but as something that happens mostly to old people (and not to themselves). Grieving children can become afraid of school, have learning problems, develop antisocial or aggressive behaviors, become overly concerned about their own health (for example, developing symptoms of imaginary illness), or withdraw from others. Or, children this age can become too attached and clinging. Boys usually become more aggressive and destructive (for example, acting out in school), instead of openly showing their sadness. When a parent dies children may feel abandoned by both their deceased parent and their surviving parent because the surviving parent is grieving and is unable to emotionally support the child.

Ages 9 and older

By the time a child is 9 years old, death is known to be unavoidable and is not seen as a punishment. By the time a child is 12 years old, death is seen as final and something that happens to everyone.

	Understanding of Death	Expressions of Grief
Infancy to 2 years	Is not yet able to understand death.	Quietness, crankiness, decreased activity, poor sleep, and weight loss.
	Separation from mother causes changes.	
2-6 years	Death is like sleeping.	Asks many questions (How does she go to the bathroom? How does she eat?).
		Problems in eating, sleeping, and bladder and bowel control.
		Fear of abandonment.
		Tantrums.
	Dead person continues to live and function in some ways.	Magical thinking (Did I think something or do something that caused the death? Like when I said I hate you and I wish you would die?).
	Death is temporary, not final.	
Dead person can come back to life.		
6-9 years	Death is thought of as a person or spirit (skeleton, ghost, bogeyman).	Curious about death.
		Asks specific questions.
		May have exaggerated fears about school.
	Death is final and frightening.	May have aggressive behaviors (especially boys).
		Some concerns about imaginary illnesses.
	Death happens to others, it won't happen to ME.	May feel abandoned.
9 and older	Everyone will die.	Heightened emotions, guilt, anger, shame.
		Increased anxiety over own death.
		Mood swings.
	Death is final and cannot be changed.	Fear of rejection; not wanting to be different from peers.
	Even I will die.	Changes in eating habits.
		Sleeping problems.

	Understanding of Death	Expressions of Grief
		Regressive behaviors (loss of interest in outside activities).
		Impulsive behaviors.
		Feels guilty about being alive (especially related to death of a brother, sister, or peer).