

Children's Developmental Stages and Reactions to Death

Ages	Common Developmental Characteristics	Grief Reactions	Helpful Approaches
2 – 5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Magical, fantastical thinking • Active fantasy life • Highly egocentric • May blame self for bad things • May not be able to verbalize needs and fears • Reversibility of concepts. Need to repeat things 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confusion. Agitation at night; may be afraid to go to sleep • Child may be able to appreciate a profound event has occurred, but may not understand permanence of death • May seem unaffected • Repeated questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simple, honest words and phrases • Reassurance • Secure and loving environment • Drawing, reading, playing together, active play • Support play as form of expression • Include in the funeral rituals
5 – 8 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child can think concretely and logically • Ability to use language increases • Increased memory capacity, both long and short term • Increased awareness of feelings and expectations of others • Peers important 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Want to understand death in a concrete way • Denial, anger, sorrow • Distress • May act as though nothing has happened • Desire to be like peers • May repeat questions • May need physical activity regularly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Answer questions simply and honestly • Look for confused thinking • Offer physical outlets • Reassurance about the future • Drawing, reading, playing together • Include in funeral rituals
8 – 12 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enjoy games, and competing • Begin to have increased understanding of self and relationship to world • Increased propensity for language • Able to reason through situations using problem solving skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shock, denial, anxiety, distress • Try to cope • Understand finality of death • May have morbid curiosity, or want to know specifics about death and dying • May need regular physical activity • Want to be like peers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Answer questions directly and honestly • Reassurance about the future • Create times to talk about feelings and questions • Offer physical outlets • Reading • Include in funeral plans and rituals
12 – 18 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need independence • Can think abstractly • Puberty usually has begun by now • May have false sense of 'immortality' • Peer group important • May begin to have intimate relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shock, anger, distress • May become depressed or withdraw • May react similar to adult, but have less coping mechanisms • May feel isolated, especially from peers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow and encourage expression of feelings • Encourage peer support • Groups may be helpful • Utilize other adults • Maintain consistent environment • Include in funeral plans and rituals