

# DEVELOPMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH

AGE LEVEL	UNDERSTANDING	REACTIONS	SUPPORT FROM CAREGIVERS
<b>INFANT/TODDLER</b> (Birth – 2 Years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• None yet</li> <li>• Senses and reacts to changes of emotional atmosphere and separation/absence of parent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mirror's coping of caregiver</li> <li>• Physiological disturbances include eating, sleeping, bowel, bladder</li> <li>• Emotional disturbances include fussiness, crying, clinginess, withdrawal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consistency of caregiver</li> <li>• Schedules, routines</li> <li>• Stable and secure environment</li> <li>• Holding, play</li> </ul>
<b>PRESCHOOL</b> (3-5 Years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited</li> <li>• May think that death is reversible, temporary, magical, impersonal</li> <li>• "Less alive", "not here"</li> <li>• Punishment, "my fault"</li> <li>• Many questions</li> <li>• Concrete concerns</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Short periods of sadness</li> <li>• Physiological disturbances are the same as infant/toddler</li> <li>• Emotional disturbances are the same as infant/toddler</li> <li>• Expect developmental regression</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consistency of caregiver</li> <li>• Security explanations (concrete, short, simple, honest)</li> <li>• Repetition</li> <li>• Reassurance</li> <li>• Expectations (changes, funeral)</li> </ul>
<b>LOWER ELEMENTARY</b> (6-9 Years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Death is possible; not personal (5-9)</li> <li>• Begins to understand concept of irreversibility (9 years)</li> <li>• Considers own mortality (9-10)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Short sadness spans</li> <li>• Concerned about the pain of death</li> <li>• Emotional - crying, guilt, fear ("I may die at the same age.)</li> <li>• Withdrawal</li> <li>• Bravery (may mask/deny or joke about feelings)</li> <li>• Anger towards deceased or those involved at the time of death</li> <li>• Anger towards God/Higher Power</li> <li>• School problems (behavior, attention, social)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explanations should be short and simple</li> <li>• Acknowledgement of feelings (all are okay!)</li> <li>• Reassurance ("Not your fault", "We will be OK",</li> <li>• Expectations (changes, funeral, grief process, other's responses)</li> <li>• Contact school</li> </ul>
<b>UPPER ELEMENTARY</b> (10-12 Years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Death is final, real                         <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Irreversible</li> <li>○ Universal</li> <li>○ Inevitable</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Cycle of Nature is understood</li> <li>• Interest in biological aspects of life/death</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aggression, anger, guilt</li> <li>• Preoccupation with death</li> <li>• Denial</li> <li>• Risk taking</li> <li>• Idealization of deceased</li> <li>• May turn to new friends</li> <li>• Drugs</li> <li>• Suicidal ideation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explanations should be honest and accurate</li> <li>• Acknowledgement of their loss</li> <li>• Permission to cry/talk/experience anger</li> <li>• Reassurance</li> <li>• Expectations (changes, responsibilities)</li> </ul>
<b>ADOLESCENCE</b> (13-18 Years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Death is irreversible</li> <li>• Biological understanding</li> <li>• Life is fragile</li> <li>• Abstract thinking</li> <li>• Understands implications of death</li> <li>• Seeks spiritual understanding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aggression, anger, guilt</li> <li>• Preoccupation with death</li> <li>• Denial</li> <li>• Risk taking</li> <li>• Idealization of deceased</li> <li>• May turn to new friends</li> <li>• Drugs</li> <li>• Suicidal ideation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explanations should be honest and accurate</li> <li>• Acknowledgement of their loss</li> <li>• Permission to cry/talk/experience anger</li> <li>• Reassurance</li> <li>• Expectations (changes, responsibilities)</li> </ul>

Adapted from Brooks, D. (2017). Bereavement Workshop at Loma Linda University, Loma Linda. It's OK to Feel Painful Interventions for Preschoolers at Grief