

# HOW KIDS UNDERSTAND DEATH, GRIEF & LOSS

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Children have AN AWARENESS OF DEATH even if they don't talk about it in our presence. TV, comics, books, conversations overheard, cartoons and soap operas all help kids form ideas about death.

Our ideas about death grow with age, development and experience. As experience with death grows, from observing the death of flowers, insects, and birds to that of pets and people, a child's concepts of death widen.

One of the many problems in dealing with children and death is the tendency of adults to equate their own perceptions of death with those of the child. Children are not simply little adults, short size 3's or monsters in disguise. They are people, unique in their own special ways .... constantly striving to make sense out of their world.

Children are not rubber balls! They do understand loss on their own levels of developmental processing and are capable of intense emotions, even if they do not express such emotions. Children do not hurt any less simply because the surface area for experiencing pain is slightly less than that of an adult.

Let's look at some of the developmental stages that children experience and correlate those "stages" with how they formulate their understandings about death and loss.



Research by Nagy-Feifel. Confirmed by millions of children.

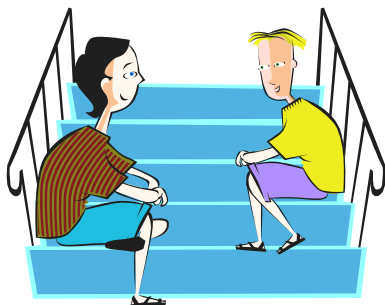
**INFANT** **BEING, NON-BEING.** “Peek a boo”. Impacted by emotional atmosphere of family. Sensitive to touch, light, handling, facial expressions, etc.

**3-5** **TEMPORARY. NOT PERMANENT, NOT UNIVERSAL. RESTORATION POSSIBLE.** “When is Grandma coming back?” **ENFEEBLED LIFE** (lives in casket, have children point to where Heaven is, Do dead people eat chocolate cake? How do they go to the bathroom? Do they get cold or wet in the ground?) **FEAR OF SEPARATION** great. **PANIC. WHO WILL TAKE CARE OF ME NOW?** Very **EGO CENTERED, CONCRETE IN LEVEL OF THINKING. NO ABSTRACT CONCEPTS OR THOUGHTS.**

**5-9** **PERSONIFICATION (BOOGY MAN).** CATASTROPHIC, powerful force to be reckoned with. NOT PERSONAL, NOR UNIVERSAL. **DEATH PICKS YOU OUT. CAN BE AVOIDED. VERY GOOD or VERY BAD** to elude death. NOT FAIR! Still quite concrete in thinking, but begin to understand values and some abstract thinking.

**9-12** PERMANENT, UNIVERSAL, PERSONAL. Will die **SOME DAY.** Only old should die. Sees self as single identity. Knows will survive if someone close dies. Fascinated by **MACABRE.** Loves **DEATH DETAILS,** horror stories, blood & guts (camp/slumber party stories). **WANTS INFORMATION** in attempt to explore the dimensions. **TOUCH, FEEL DEATH.**

**12-UP** **FEARFUL** yet **FASCINATED.** Strong, **INTENSE EMOTIONS. VERY PERSONAL.** **ENEMY**=represents loss of newly discovered **ME.** May be seen as “**TEMPTING DEATH**”, or testing limits.



## TALKING WITH CHILDREN ABOUT DEATH

Death should not be a “hush-hush” topic with children. Relying upon euphemistic phrases such as: “She passed away”, “He’s gone to sleep” or “Grandma went away on a long trip”...are often more harmful than helpful. Death is a **NATURAL AND NORMAL CONSEQUENCE OF LIVING**. It should not be a taboo subject for thought or discussion.

Virtually every child will experience the death of a friend, pet or family member (or knows someone who has had such an experience and shared it with them). Children do develop thoughts and ideas about death at an early age. They also learn quickly whom they can and cannot talk with about those thoughts and ideas!

**Ages 3-5:** These children do not yet accept death as a permanent process. Death has an ending and they often ask questions such as “When will Grandpa come back?” They fear separation more than death.

**Ages 5-9:** These children are beginning to understand that death is permanent, but it is not yet universal. Death is often personified and given powers to select those who are to die.

**Ages 9-12:** Death, for these children, is permanent, personal and universal. They understand they, too, will die...SOMEDAY. They are fascinated with the macabre and find details of death events appealing.

**Ages 12+:** Most adolescents have reached adult levels of understanding about death. Many adolescents have very intense emotions about death and do spend time thinking about death.

Children should be offered opportunities to talk about death as they experience it in their everyday world. The death of flowers, leaves, pets and relatives should be addressed as a natural occurrence in the scheme of life.

Children should be included in the rituals of death whenever possible and appropriate. They should be offered the opportunity to participate if they so desire.

Expressions of sadness and grief should be shared. They can participate in the support of family and friends and should be included in family visits and conversations.

Children's questions about death should be answered as honestly as possible. It is important to try to discover what is behind the question being asked and to respond appropriately. Do not feel obligated to have all the answers. Sometimes, wondering and exploring are more important than answering. Do not ignore questions, however. Some type of response is always needed, as children will create answers for questions not heard and explored.





## Thoughts About Death From The Wisdom Of Children

These thoughts have been collected from children as they struggled with understanding death. They reflect innocence, insight and intuition. Some of their information is accurate, some is not. HOW WOULD YOU RESPOND TO THE QUESTION AND TO THE CHILD'S ANSWER?

### WHAT IS DEATH?

- It's when the body stops working...the heart stops beating.
- It's the END.
- It's the beginning of a new life, but I don't know very much about it.
- It's when the real you leaves the body. I wonder where YOU GO?
- It's a change in life.

### DOES EVERYONE DIE?

- Yes...everyone
- Neither you nor I will die for a LOOONG time. But you might.
- Only sick people...only very sick people. (How sick is VERY SICK?)

### WHEN WILL YOU DIE?

- I don't know
- Never
- Not for a long time, I hope.
- When I get old.
- I won't die if I am good (healthy, nice to my brother, etc)
- In about a million years
- When death comes to get me

### WHAT HAPPENS TO PEOPLE WHEN THEY DIE?

- They go to Heaven.
- They go to be with the angels, but I don't know how to fly.
- I don't know, but it must be OK because it's with God.
- They are buried.
- Nothing.
- They rot in the ground until they go to heaven which I hope isn't a long time...

## **WHERE IS THE PERSON WHO DIED?**

- Sleeping
- Hiding
- Gone away. Gone to be with God...wherever HE is
- He passed away so I don't know where he is.
- With God somewhere

## **CAN A DEAD PERSON COME BACK?**

- Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo
- Maybe...I hope so (but not at night)
- No, but we can keep the memories and the pictures
- I wish they could

## **WHAT MAKES PEOPLE DIE?**

- God.
- Germs.
- A gun. A BAD man. Bullets.
- Cars (auto accident.)
- Old age.
- Eating an apple and not chewing it good.
- Swimming alone (drowning.)
- BAD thoughts.
- Wishes (I wished my brother was dead and he was.)

## **HOW CAN YOU HELP SOMEONE WHO IS SAD?**

- BE THERE.
- Hug them and give them cookies.
- I don't think you can help anybody hurt. They have to do it alone.
- Don't forget them. Talk about the dead person. Remember them.
- Pray with them, but don't tell them it's God's fault (will.)
- I just cry with them.

