

Children's understanding of death at different ages

Children under 2 years of age

Babies and young children have no understanding of the concept of death yet, long before they are able to talk, babies are likely to react to upset and changes in their environment brought about by the absence of a significant person who responded to their needs for care and nourishment on a daily basis. They will also be impacted by the emotional withdrawal that may happen if a parent or main carer is bereaved.

Up to the age of 6 months, babies will experience a sense of abandonment and insecurity which may result in increased crying and disruption of sleep and feeding. From around the age of 8 months or so, babies begin to develop a 'mental image' of the person who has died and have a sense of 'missing them'. Babies at this age may cry more or become more withdrawn; they may lose interest in toys or food and, as they develop motor skills and language, may call out for or search for the person who has died.

Children aged 2 to 5 years

Young children are interested in the idea of death in birds and animals. They can begin to use the word 'dead' and develop an awareness that this is different to being alive. Children of this age do not understand abstract concepts like 'forever' and cannot grasp that death is permanent. Their limited understanding may lead to an apparent lack of reaction when told about a death, and they may ask many questions about where the person who has died is and when that person will come back. Children at this age expect the person to return.

Young children tend to interpret what they are told in a very literal and concrete way; therefore, it is important to avoid offering explanations of death such as 'lost', 'gone away' or 'gone to sleep' that may cause misunderstandings and confusion.

Children may have disrupted sleep, altered appetite, less interest in play and may become more anxious about separation even when being left with familiar adults. There may be regression in skills such as language or toilet training.

Children of primary school age

Between the ages of 5 and 7 years, children gradually begin to develop an understanding that death is permanent and irreversible and that the person who has died will not return. Children who have been bereaved when they were younger will have to re-process what has happened as they develop awareness of the finality of death.

Children's imagination and 'magical thinking' at this age can mean that some children may believe that their thoughts or actions caused the death, and they can feel guilty. Not being given sufficient information in age-appropriate language can lead them to 'make-up' and fill in the gaps in their knowledge. Children increasingly become aware that death is an inevitable part of life that happens to all living things. As a result, they can become anxious about their own, and others', health and safety.

Teenagers

Adolescence is a time of great change and grief impacts on the developmental task of moving from dependence to independence. Young people are moving from familial ties to increased involvement with peers. It can be difficult to ask for support while trying to demonstrate independence. Young people do not like to feel different to their peers in any way and being a bereaved young person can be extremely isolating. The support of peers with similar experiences can be very powerful.

Teenagers will have an adult understanding of the concept of death but often have their own beliefs and strongly held views, and may challenge the beliefs and explanations offered by others.

Some young people may respond to a death by becoming more withdrawn, some may 'act out' their distress while others cope with the awareness of their own mortality through risk-taking behaviour. Others may take on adult responsibilities and become 'the carer' for those around them.

Young people who have been bereaved at an earlier age may need to re-process their grief as they think about and plan for their future and fully understand the impact of life without the person who died.