

Children's Age & Understanding of Death



0 - 2 years

Change is likely to produce distress & fear of separation.

They have a sense of loss and may feel the effect on the family.

Will show distress about sudden disappearance of someone he/she depended on.

Their behaviour may be affected.

Consistent nurturing by the same person if possible is important to meet the child's needs.

Adults need to keep memories to help the child remember.

Questions will come as they get older.

3-7 years

The Child can now keep the adult in mind.

They need answers to be clear – Granny has died (not gone to sleep)

Concept of death is temporary or reversible e.g. "shall we dig granny up now?"

They may ask questions – when's mummy coming home?

They may have limited understanding of other people's feelings – Why is everyone crying?

There is a greater need for a secure base and routine.

Their reactions are likely to be body-centred, - bed wetting, illness, tantrums.

They usually only tolerate a certain level of pain: "Why is everyone still so sad?"

Be involved in Magical thinking – "One day to surprise Mummy, I'm going to heaven to get Daddy back.

8-11 years

May have a mature concept of death, understanding about bodies, coffins, funerals and that death is irreversible and could include them.

They will be able to discuss more, be curious and ask difficult questions "why did God take daddy"?

Aware of other people's feelings but may have difficulty expressing their own.

Things that previously been manageable become more worrying: monsters in the dark, the news.

They may take on the role as carer and appear more grown up.

Their behaviour may be affected, bedwetting, tantrums, outbursts of anger, not wanting to go to school.

They need time to be heard and understood, not put down or made to feel stupid.

An increased need for routine.

Adolescence

They should not be expected to take on the responsibilities of the dead parent.

Try not to burden them, consult them, respect their feelings and reassure them.

The adolescent feels very much like an adult in their response to death, but these feelings may be complicated by the problems of the adolescence itself.

A particularly difficult time to experience the death of someone important in your life such as a parent or sibling