

Children and Reactions to Death

Adapted from National Association of School Psychologists

A child's need to ask the same questions about death over and over is more of a need for reassurance that the story has not changed rather than a need for factual accuracy. Children also seek adult reactions so they can gauge their own reactions. Emotions may be expressed as angry outbursts or misbehaviors that are often not recognized as grief related.

Developmental phases in understanding death

Ages 5-9

This is the age when children begin to understand the finality of death. Death is seen as an accident rather than inevitable. Death is often seen as something that will happen to others not to ourselves.

Age 10-12

Children have the mental development and emotional security to express an understanding of death as a final and inevitable event.

Common reactions for all students

1. Anxious/fearful
2. Sad
3. Lonely/vulnerable
4. Guilty
5. Angry
6. Confused/scared
7. Withdrawn
8. Act aggressively
9. Poor attention span/lower grades
10. Act like it never happened
11. Nightmares/sleep disturbance
12. Appetite changes (over or under eating)

Suggestions for parents to support children

1. Answer and encourage questions about illness, death, divorce, disaster, hospitals, etc.
2. Encourage them to talk about their feelings. Use reflective listening.
3. Share your grief reactions in order to normalize theirs.
4. Read books about death/loss/divorce, etc.
5. Encourage them to seek out other safe, familiar adults when unable to discuss your grief/fears/concerns.
6. Encourage physical activities and play.
7. Maintain routine and provide good nutritional and sleep patterns.
8. Give hope. Children need to know they will enjoy life again.
9. Talk about the person who dies/the loss in everyday conversation.