

Children's Understanding of Death and Reactions to Grief

Age	Understanding of death	Common grief reactions	Traumatic grief reactions
Preschool and young children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not understand that death is final. • May think that they will see the person again or that the person can come back to life. • May think it was their fault that the person died. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May become upset when their routines change. • May get worried or fussy when apart from their usual caregivers and may be clingy and want extra attention. • May express fears, sadness, and confusion by having nightmares or tantrums, being withdrawn, or regressing to earlier behaviors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May repetitively engage in play about the death or the person who died. • May have problems getting back on schedule or meeting developmental milestones. • May have difficulty being comforted.
School-age children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gradually gain a more mature understanding of death. • Begin to realize that death is final and that people do not come back to life. • May have scary beliefs about death, like believing in the "boogey man" who comes for the person. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May ask lots of questions about how the person died and about what death means. • May display distress and sadness in ways that are not always clear, like being irritable and easily angered. • May avoid spending time with others. • May have physical complaints (headaches, stomachaches). • May have trouble sleeping. • May have problems at school. • May have no reaction at all. • May dream of events related to the death or war. • May want to call home during the school day. • May reject old friends and seek new friends who have experienced a similar loss. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May repeatedly talk or play about the death. • May have nightmares about the death. • May become withdrawn, hide feelings (especially guilt), avoid talking about the person, or about places and/or things related to the death. • May avoid reminders of the person (for example, may avoid watching TV news, may refuse to attend the funeral or visit the cemetery). • May become jumpy, extra-alert, or nervous. • May have difficulty concentrating on homework or classwork, or may suffer a decline in grades. • May worry excessively about their health, their parents' health, or the health and safety of other people. • May act out and become the "class clown" or "bully."
Teens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a full adult understanding of death. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May have similar grief reactions to those of school-age children when at home, with friends, and at school. • May withdraw, become sad, or lose interest in activities. • May act out, have trouble in school, or engage in risky behavior. • May feel guilt and shame related to the death. • May worry about the future. • May hide their true feelings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May have similar traumatic grief reactions to those of school-age children when at home, with friends, and at school. • May avoid interpersonal and social situations such as dating. • May use drugs or alcohol to deal with negative feelings related to the death. • May talk of wanting to harm themselves and express thoughts of revenge or worries about the future. • May have low self-esteem because they feel that their family is now "different" or because they feel different from their peers.