

Children's Concept of Death

Zusman Hospice Bereavement Support



At some point, children will face the complicated task of trying to understand a loss. As adults, our ideas about death change as we add experiences to our lives. Children are just beginning this complex journey. Young people will understand death according to their individual emotional and intellectual development. A child who experiences a loss at a young age will achieve a new understanding of what loss means as he or she matures. It is important to recognize what each child is capable of understanding and to know that in each age group there are common behaviors and reactions specific to that developmental stage. We can help children learn appropriate responses by being open and available and by our own example.

Under 3 Years Old

Even young children are sensitive to the changes a loss can bring about. They notice increased levels of anxiety and sadness in their caregivers. New people may suddenly be in the home and the child's routine disrupted. While a small child will not be able to intellectually understand what death is, he or she will certainly notice the absence of a significant person.

Ages 3 to 5

The concept of "forever" is difficult for this age. They will see death as temporary, reversible or as a restricted form of existence. Death as a separation is particularly frightening for children of this age. Children need reassurance that the emotions they are experiencing are normal and OK. Young children frequently believe that their thoughts can cause things to happen, and they sometimes connect unrelated events in highly creative ways in an attempt to make sense of a loss. It is worth asking, "Do you think that something you said, did or thought had anything to do with (name of the deceased's) death?" Clear, direct explanations of what happened and why are especially important at this age.

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Ages 6 to 9

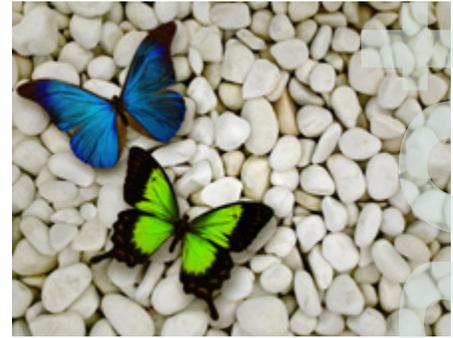
By this age, children begin to understand that death is final, but still see it as happening mostly to other people. They may perceive death as a scary creature or person that takes people away. Or they may fear that death is contagious and do not have a clear understanding of what is contagious and what is not. There is still a tendency to believe that thoughts make things happen. Children may worry about the vulnerability of their caregivers and often will want the reassurance of knowing who would care for them if something happened to their primary caregiver(s). Clear explanations continue to be vital. Pointed curiosity about physical details is common.

Ages 10 to 12

Older children have often had some experience of loss by this point, most commonly the loss of a pet. They know that death is final and comes to all living things, but they still see it as distant from themselves. Children this age will be concerned about practical things and may worry about how the loss will affect their immediate future. Sensitivity to being different from their peers may be present. Interest in hearing all the “gory details” continues.

Adolescence

Death is both fascinating and frightening. As teenagers struggle to forge their independent identities, death is particularly threatening. Losses may make teens feel more childlike and dependent. The loss of a parent may come at a time when the teenager has been pushing parents away as part of the normal separation process, and cause confusion and guilt. Teenagers may feel that the situation requires them to step into an adult role in response to the loss. Teenagers are uncomfortable with anything that makes them different from their peers.



Grief support is available to you and your loved ones from the Zusman Hospice Bereavement Staff. We offer support through phone calls, individual counseling and group sessions. Please contact us at **614-559-0350**.

Remember, each child and adolescent is unique. These descriptions should be used as very broad guidelines.

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