How Children Respond to Death

A child's response to death will depend on many factors:

- The closeness of the relationship
- The involvement with the deceased
- The circumstances of the death
- Whether the death was sudden or anticipated
- How the death impacts on the life of the child
- e.g. the care given
- How much practical support is available to the family
- The child's age and level of understanding

Infants 0 – 2 years

- Will feel the loss as it impacts on daily routine
- Will be sensitive to the feelings of those around them
- May be fractious and demand attention
- They have little or no language to express feelings
- Adults will need to keep memories alive
- The loss of a normally constant figure will be
- highly significant

Pre-school and up to age of 7

- Pre-school children see death as temporary and reversible – they have a limited concept of 'gone' and may expect to see the person again
- From the age of 5 basic facts may be understood, such as that death is universal, has a cause and is permanent – also dead people do not eat drink etc
- They may employ' magical thinking' – i.e. that they can influence events by thought or action, either to harm someone or bring them back to life
- Their world is egocentric
- They may ask questions constantly
- They need literal facts so use the correct words such as dead, not asleep
- Having a limited vocabulary, they will express themselves through play.
- Play is their 'work' and they will soon return to it
- There may be limited understanding of others' feelings
- Reactions may be physical e.g. bedwetting
- May have nightmares
- They need routine

Where Professional Help May Be Needed

- If the following symptoms persist beyond the first few weeks / months:
- Long periods of depression, lack of interest and withdrawal / low self-esteem
- Sleeping/eating disturbance and physical illnesses
- Prolonged fear of being alone
- Prolonged regression
- Prolonged denial
- Refusal to attend school / decline in grades / aggression toward others
- Continual imitation of deceased or talking about wanting to be with them

Ages 8 – 11 years

- Understand irreversibility of death
- May be very curious and ask difficult questions
- May try to live up to expectations of being more grown up – become the 'carer'
- Are aware of other people's feelings whilst being unable to express their own
- Friends become more important
- Still 'dip in and out' of grief
- May use body to express reactions i.e. refusal to go to school

Ages 11 – 15 Years

- There is a greater realisation of the loss
- Grief may be expressed directly rather than through bodily reactions
- Likely to feel isolated from peers
- Boys and girls may be showing gender
- differences in expression of grief
- May still 'dip in and out' of grief
- Need a secure base but may severely test boundaries
- Begin to realise that as death is universal they too will die

Friends are of primary importance

16 Years Plus

- The child/adult within the teenager will be in conflict
- Egocentricity is present once more
- May hide feelings from others and from self
- Finding space to grieve will difficult
- Will be finding his/her own meaning to life
- May turn against family where there is change – or may see family as safe
- May not readily engage with adults