

# A Child's Response 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 the 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 & that dead people do not eat/drink

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

There may be nightmares

They need routine

May 'dip in and out' of grief as they cannot tolerate excessive levels of pain.

Regression to an earlier age may occur

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## **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

## **Ages 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 be 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

## **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

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