

CONCEPTS OF DEATH BY AGE GROUP

The concept of death from a child's perspective is very different from an adult's understanding of death. Furthermore, as the child grows and matures, his/her earlier ways of thinking about death will change. It is essential for the adult to have a sense of how children conceptualize death at different ages so that when the time comes to talk about death, whether of a pet or a loved one, the adult can respond in a manner appropriate to the child's developmental age. The ages given below are not meant to be exact but rather representative of the differing developmental stages.

Young Infants – Birth to 1 Year Of Age

- Up to 6 months, a loss brings no response due to undeveloped memory capacity for specific personal relationships.
- Up to 6 months, there is no ability to conceptualize death.
- From 6 months to 1 year, a loss, like separation, may be felt, if at all, as a vague absence or experiential sense of "something different."

Older Infants - 1 to 2 Years Of Age

- The death of the primary caregiver will usually result in displeasure and depression.
- Although a loss may occur, there is no ability to understand or attribute meaning to it.
- Infants can be influenced by the parent's tense and emotional grief reactions to a death in the immediate family.

2 to 6 Years Of Age

- Death is understood as temporary and reversible.
- There is no concept of a personal death; death is something that only happens to other people.
- Dead persons or animals are broken and can be fixed, or asleep and can be awakened, or gone and will be back.
- Well developed 4-6 years olds often think about, and are quite interested in, death and often want to see and touch dead things.

6 to 9 Years Of Age

- From 6 to 8 years, a clearer understanding of death is developing.
- There is an increased interest in the physical and biological aspects of death.
- “Magical thinking” predominates with the belief that thoughts can make things happen. Even accidents and death.
- By 9 years of age, the child’s concept of death is very similar to an adult.
- Death is not reversible or temporary but only happens to some, or other people.
- Death is often thought of as a person or a “ghost” figure.

9 to 12 Years Of Age

- Child’s concept of death expands to that held in adult life.
- Awareness of the possibility of personal death now fully developed.
- An objective curiosity develops: “What does the body look like?”, “Is the blood blue?”, “The body stiff?”, Cold?”
- Even though there is a cognitive awareness of death and its universality and finality, there is a strong tendency towards denial.
- There is an increased interest in what happens after death.

12 Years Of Age Through Adolescence

- Death is now viewed abstractly and subjectively.
- There is strong egocentrism and a tendency to think of themselves as immortal.
- Subjective curiosity develops: “What is the meaning of life?”, “What is my special mission?”, “Why doesn’t anyone besides me understand the implications of life and death?”
- Death is often romanticized as beautiful and tragic; paradoxically a gesture or statement that will somehow endure.
- Due to television and movies, they see loss experienced through death as easy to deal with.
- Although there is much objective philosophizing about death, it is still seen as something that happens to others.