

DEVELOPMENTAL UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH AND LOSS

AGES	LEVEL OF UNDERSTANDING	REACTIVE BEHAVIORS	NEEDS
2 AND UNDER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can sense that something is different at home. • Does not yet understand what death is. • Probably won't remember the person who died. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fussiness • Clinging to adults • Regressive behavior 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-verbal care (such as hugs and rocking) • Stable routine
2 – 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sees death as temporary – believes person will return. Don't fear death, but fear separation. • Usually can't comprehend the concepts of heaven, afterlife or soul. • Feels sadness, but often periods of grief are interspersed with normal playing behavior. • Substitutes attachment from the deceased person to another person. • May not remember the person who died. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regression (bed-wetting, thumb-sucking) • Fear of separation • Nightmares • Aggression • Non-compliance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stable daily routine • Structure • Honesty, use the words "dead" and "died" • Answers to questions honestly but simply • Love • Reassurance • To be heard, so listen
6 – 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begins to understand that death is permanent. • Develops fear of death and of others dying. • May feel guilt and blame self for death; see it as punishment for bad behavior. • Magical thinking; may see self as cause of death. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grief ebbs and flows • Compulsive caregiving • Aggression • Possessiveness (e.g., of remaining parent) • Regression • Somatic complaints • School phobia • Exaggerated fears 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ways to express their feelings (art, writing, etc.) • Concrete answers to questions • Validation of feelings • Love • Reassurance that they are not to blame • To be heard, so listen
10 – 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has a realistic view of death and its permanence. • Asks specific questions about death, the body, etc. Interested in the gory details. • Concerned with practical questions. (Who will take care of me? How will my family's lifestyle change? Etc.) • Identifies strongly with deceased. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upset by the disruption in their lives • Blame others for the loss • Separation anxiety, some denial and/or guilt • Difficulty concentrating • Decline in school performance • Want to be "fixers" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permission and outlets to express feelings, including anger, relief, sadness, etc. • Validation of feelings • Offers of support and assistance and to know who can help them to be heard, so listen, listen, and listen
13 – 18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizes that life is fragile; death is inevitable and irreversible. • May worry about own death. • Often tries not to think or talk about the death. Sometimes hides feelings so as not to look different from peers. • Ponders and questions religious and philosophical beliefs. • Often angry at the deceased or at people involved in the death (e.g., doctors). • Fears the future. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aggression, anger • Possessiveness • Somatic complaints • Phobias • Increased risk-taking • Promiscuity • Increased drug/alcohol use • Defiance • Delinquent acts • Suicidal ideation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A trusted adult or peer for support • Parental openness in sharing feelings • Help in learning to manage feelings • Continued emotional support • Presence of parents • Encouragement of efforts toward independence

