



children's understanding of death

When talking to a child about a death there are three important things to think about:

- What does the child want to know?
- What does the child need to know?
- What can the child understand?

What does the child want to know?

In general, when a child asks questions about death:

1. Give honest, brief answers to questions.
2. Do not give long or complicated answers, a child can absorb limited amounts of information. Adults can often say too much, overwhelming the child with information. It is generally better to begin the dialogue with some basic information and let the child's questions direct the conversation.
3. Keep responses at the child's level of understanding (to be discussed later).
4. Listen.
5. Accept the child's feelings. Every feeling is a legitimate feeling. Telling a child they must not feel angry, guilty, or otherwise discounting emotions shuts down the process of the child expressing those feelings.

What does the child need to know?

1. If a child is left uninformed he or she may imagine or visualize things even worse than what is the truth.
2. The loss was not his fault. Many young children blame themselves after a death. They feel that their own thoughts or behaviors may have brought on the death.
3. Death is the final, natural part of life: death is not a form of punishment.
4. The death was not because the one who died wanted to leave him/her.
5. The child has others who care and will take care of him/her.
6. The child is loved.

What can the child understand?

There are five major concepts that constitute an understanding of death.

1. **Universality or inevitability** involves an understanding that all living things, including oneself, eventually will die and that no one can escape death. Along with this concept comes the question of **when** do people die?
 - Does every one die?
 - Do children and animals die too?
 - Can I or the people I know and love avoid dying?
 - Can you or I die at any time?
2. **Irreversibility or finality** involves the understanding that death cannot be reversed by magic, medicine, food and water, or other means.
 - How long do you stay dead?
- Can dead people come alive again?
3. **Nonfunctionality or the cessation of bodily functions** involves the recognition that death ends all movement, feeling, sensation, thought and other abilities.
 - Can you see or hear noises or feel the heat and cold when you are dead?
 - Are dead people sleeping?
 - Do dead people eat, play, or go to the bathroom?
4. **Causality** involves the understanding of why death occurs. Younger children tend to attribute death more to external causes, such as guns or accidents, while older children recognize internal causes such as old age, illness, or some other biological factors.
- Why do people die?

- What caused him/her to die?
 - Can someone die because someone wished that they would die?
- 5. Spirituality of death** involves the mental and emotional capacity to seek an understanding of what happens after death.
- Where does your soul go when you die?
 - Will I ever come back to life again?
 - Even though my body dies, will my spirit go on to a better life?

CHILDREN'S AGE APPROPRIATE UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH

Newborn to age three

Children in this age group cannot comprehend the concept of death; however, they can understand sadness. They are aware of things in the family routine that are different, but can't intellectually comprehend the situation. They may sense sadness, anxiety, or excitement in the home, the presence of new people, parents being gone at odd times, or that a significant person is missing. They may stop nursing (in infants), become cranky, have altered sleep patterns, and/or a change in eating habits.

Age three to six

Children in this age group think of death as reversible: people will come back; death is temporary. They may equate it with something like travel and ongoing life in another place or with sleep and ongoing life in some diminished form. Children may ask questions about the dead person's return; also they may not be really affected by the death, since they expect the person to come back soon. They cannot understand the concept of finality at this age.

Age six to nine

Most children at this age are aware that death is a common finality for all living things. At this age, children personify death and may have nightmares about it. They do not, however, see death as personal. They harbor the idea that they can avoid it in some way. Children in this age group need a more detailed explanation of why a person died. It's important to distinguish fatal illness from just being sick. They may equate having a cold or not feeling good with dying. They may see death as a taker; something that comes and gets you. Or, they may see it as something you catch, like a cold. They may be afraid of going to a house where someone has died. Children at this age may feel responsible for the death.

Age nine to twelve

This child is able to understand that death is the inevitable and irreversible outcome of life. They are more aware of the impact a death may have on them. Children at this age may show more anger, guilt, and grief. At this age children may grieve earlier losses because they now can understand the meaning of death.

Age twelve to eighteen

The teenager has the mental and emotional capacity to sense the meaning of death. Teenagers realize that they, too, will die some day; many are intrigued with seeking the meaning of life. They develop philosophical views of life and death. The older the child the greater the temptation to assume they can handle themselves and their problems. However, they need a great deal of help and support to understand their feelings at this time.

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