

How a bereaved child/young person may respond

Early Years (Ages 0 – 2)

| Likely understanding of death | Likely emotional response | Likely behaviour |
|--|---|--|
| Possible thoughts | Possible feelings | Possible 'doing' (behaviour) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cannot understand the abstract concept of death • No understanding that death is final • More acutely aware of loss and separation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short bursts of intense sadness • Tend to respond to the adult emotional state • Experience discomfort at sudden changes • Anxiety caused by the separation or absence of the person, particularly if they are the main caregiver. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Searching and calling for the deceased • Irritable/unsettled/ protesting • Changes in eating and sleeping patterns and potential weight loss • 'Clingy' behaviour • Frequent crying • Rejection of other caregivers |

Early Years (Ages 2-5)

| Likely understanding of death | Likely emotional response | Likely behaviour |
|---|--|---|
| Possible thoughts | Possible feelings | Possible 'doing' (behaviour) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unable to understand that death is final and permanent • Death is seen as temporary and reversible – e.g. may believe that the dead person is living elsewhere. • Think in literal and concrete terms and will be confused by euphemisms for death, e.g. the person has "gone to sleep". • Do not visualise death as separate from life, nor as something that can happen to them. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grief reactions can be brief but very intense. • May be upset about altered patterns of care. • Anger could be expressed through play. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confusion may lead to questions about the health of the dead person. • May experience/ report physical (psychosomatic) symptoms, e.g. tummy ache. • May experience nightmares. • Refusal to go to nursery/school or refusal to leave. • Regressive behaviours e.g. clinging, bed wetting, thumb sucking, inconsolable crying, temper tantrums and withdrawal from others. • May exhibit anxiety towards strangers. • May search intensely for the deceased despite assurance that the person will not return. |

Primary Years (Ages 5-8)

| Likely understanding of death | Likely emotional response | Likely behaviour |
|--|---|---|
| Possible thoughts | Possible feelings | Possible 'doing' (behaviour) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sometimes feel responsible for the death because they believe negative thoughts or feelings they had about the deceased may have contributed to their death. • Can link events which are not connected in an unhelpful way. • May begin to see death as both final and that everyone dies. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More able to express their thoughts and feelings but may conceal them and appear unaffected. • May express feelings of sadness, shock, denial and confusion. • May express anger outwardly through actions or drawings instead of verbally. • May show anxiety surrounding routine separations and/or in situations in which they perceive death to be a possible outcome. • May be fearful that other loved ones will also leave or die. • May become overly concerned about their own health and may fear bodily harm and death. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May experience a lack of concentration and interest in school work as well as difficulty eating and sleeping. • May behave in ways which seek more nurture and attention. • May model their grief reaction on close adults. • May appear unaffected by the death and act as if nothing happened. • May be interested in the rituals surrounding death and may ask questions. • May ask repetitive questions about death. • Themes of family loss and death may surface when playing with dolls and action figures. May play act the death or funeral. • Current close relationships may be tested. |

End of Primary/Secondary Years (Ages 9-14)

| Likely understanding of death | Likely emotional response | Likely behaviour |
|---|--|---|
| Possible thoughts | Possible feelings | Possible 'doing' (behaviour) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased understanding of the finality, and impact of death. • May attempt, and seek to understand the biological and emotional process of death. • Are able to understand the facts surrounding the death. • They may struggle to understand their own and others' feelings about death. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May experience mood swings, anger and distress, e.g. through crying. • May feel guilty that they did not prevent the death in some way. • May attribute blame; blaming themselves or others for not preventing the death. • May wish to hide or mask their feelings so as not to appear different from their peers. • May fear that expressing sad feelings may be seen as a sign of weakness (particularly for boys) and so may seem indifferent. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May have increased curiosity about the physical aspects of death. • May continue to identify with the deceased by imitating behaviours. • May have difficulty falling to sleep, experience nightmares or very vivid dreams once asleep. • May experience a loss of appetite or excessive comfort eating. • May express their grief in uncharacteristic ways, e.g. through angry outbursts and irritability. • Feelings may be exhibited through physical illness, indifference towards schoolwork or isolation from peers. • May become more dependent on adults. |

Older Adolescents and Young Adults (Ages 15-25)

| Likely understanding of death | Likely emotional response | Likely behaviour |
|---|---|--|
| Possible thoughts | Possible feelings | Possible 'doing' (behaviour) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May philosophise about the meaning of life/death, e.g. may spend time reflecting on 'the meaning of life'. • Show understanding that death can affect all aspects of life, e.g. school, home, relationships. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May feel a sense of numbness or unreality. • May experience mood swings involving strong emotions. • Experience feelings of deep sadness. • Have feelings of being out of control. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May engage in risk taking behaviours – e.g. sensation seeking behaviours, drug/alcohol use, sexualised behaviour. • May lose focus with regard to long term plans e.g. going to college. • May choose to fill time and become excessively busy. • May show concern for practical issues after the death, such as how the household will survive without the deceased or how they will be cared for. • Might have questions regarding religious and cultural beliefs related to death. • May seek to develop relationships to replace aspects of the deceased. |