

Childhood Developmental Stages As They Relate To A Child's Awareness & Response to Death

(The following are suggested merely as characteristic responses and do not by any means represent the entirety of children's reactions.)

AGE

- 0-2**
- No formal concept of death
 - Reacts to adults' grief
 - Senses (and responds to) disruptions in schedule
 - Perceives death as separation. Responds with anger, worry and withdrawal
- 3-5**
- Death is seen as being temporary, reversible, and a form of sleep
 - Uses magical thinking & fantasy to explain things that they do not understand
 - May have many questions and often will repeat the same or similar questions frequently. This repetition does not reflect stubbornness but rather, reflects their emotional and intellectual efforts to fully understand what has happened
 - Difficulty in comprehending finality of death. May believe that the person will return
- 5-9**
- Gradually able to understand the finality of death
 - May have numerous questions. They may ask questions dealing with the practical aspects of death and reflect their curiosities about death and its impact (Example: "What happens to the body?", "Where have they gone?", "Why do we put them in the ground?", or "Does this mean we will have to move?")
- 9-12**
- Holds an understanding of death as inevitable and permanent for everyone
 - May demonstrate anger or guilt more readily than sadness
 - May withdraw from others and attempt to disguise grief
- Teens**
- May try to act as if nothing has happened and try to hide their feelings
 - May deny that they need help or support
 - May demonstrate anger or guilt more readily than sadness
 - Because grief is likely to be denied by a teen, grief will often manifest in physical signs and symptoms (bodily stress, falling grades, changes in social behaviors, etc.), which the teen cannot control and may not be able to understand

For More Information

Palliative Care information at Levine Childrens Hospital

<http://www.levinechildrenshospital.org/body.cfm?id=151&oTopID=43>

Pastoral Care & Education at Carolinas HealthCare System

<http://www.carolinashealthcare.org/programs-of-pastoral-education>