

## CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF AND REACTION TO DEATH

Grief is a normal and common human experience but it affects us all differently

Grief is a process that takes time and is not a singular event

The time it takes an individual to process a death will vary and is not predictable

Children will vary in their reactions as a result of their own developmental and conceptual level

The following behaviours and reactions are appropriate and acceptable reactions to a death

The reactions listed below will usually be evident for a short period of time

All children may openly display a wide range of emotions including but not limited to anger, frustration, guilt, relief, loss, emptiness, and sadness

*\*There is intentional blurring of age categories to acknowledge that children do not always progress or react in a predictable manner\**

Age	Understanding	Possible Behaviours	Helpful Responses
Infancy- 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May have no understanding of death but will react to emotions around them</li> <li>May respond to death of a parent as they would to any other separation from parent.</li> <li>May be unable to conceptualize death but will experience a sense of loss</li> <li>Usually receive security from hearing same answer to same question</li> <li>May experience general distress, sleeplessness, protest and confusion</li> <li>May be unable to grasp abstracts like heaven</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bodily complaints (hungry, tired, tummy aches etc.)</li> <li>Crying and general distress</li> <li>Clinginess, refusal to separate from other attachment figures</li> <li>Sleep and eating disturbances</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Include in funeral rituals</li> <li>Encourage play</li> <li>Read/ use coloring books on life cycles</li> <li>Offer physical comfort</li> <li>Continue routine and try to minimize change</li> </ul>
2 – 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May view death as temporary and reversible (equated to sleeping)</li> <li>May believe the deceased will return</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regression and aggression common (thumb sucking, toileting difficulties)</li> <li>Separation may be difficult</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Give child choice regarding funeral rituals</li> <li>Model coping with own grief</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May believe the deceased now exists somewhere else</li> <li>• May use imagination or magical thinking to explain death</li> <li>• May not understand that a traumatic event has occurred and may seem unaffected</li> <li>• Usually display matter-of-fact curiosity</li> <li>• May ask repeated questions</li> <li>• Often cannot grasp abstracts like heaven</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Escape into play</li> <li>• Can appear unaffected</li> <li>• Struggle to put feelings into words</li> <li>• General distress</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use simple words and brief explanations</li> <li>• When giving reasons for why people die use example of <i>'Very very old, very very sick or very very hurt.'</i></li> <li>• Read books to explain</li> <li>• Provide attention and reassurance of love</li> <li>• Discipline consistently</li> <li>• Maintain routine</li> </ul>
Age	Understanding	Possible Behaviours	Helpful Response
5- 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beginning to recognize reasons/reality/ finality of death</li> <li>• May still view death as reversible</li> <li>• Death may be personified, (e.g., monsters, goblins)</li> <li>• May think death won't happen to them.</li> <li>• May feel responsible for death because of thoughts, actions or wishes</li> <li>• Capacity for guilt developing</li> <li>• Cause and effect forming</li> <li>• Fear of death and related images (skeletons/ghosts/graves)</li> <li>• Depending on religious teachings may believe in an after-life</li> </ul>	<p>May experience:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-fear of forgetting</li> <li>-feelings of guilt</li> <li>-Thinking they are only one who feels this way</li> <li>-blaming self</li> <li>-confusion or sorrow</li> <li>-helplessness (respond with aggression)</li> <li>-general distress</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reactions may be delayed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give choice regarding funeral rituals</li> <li>• Set aside time for daily check-ins</li> <li>• Offer physical comfort and reassurance</li> <li>• Offer physical activity outlets</li> <li>• Answer questions simply and honestly</li> <li>• Normalize feelings</li> <li>• Discuss life cycle</li> </ul>

A28

Age	Understanding	Possible Behaviours	Helpful Responses
10-14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Usually understand irreversible nature of death</li> <li>Death seen as inevitable a biological/scientific reality for all</li> <li>Becoming more aware of own mortality</li> <li>May believe death won't occur until very old age</li> <li>Realize disruptive changes will occur as result of the death</li> <li>Lots of questions</li> <li>Life is black and white</li> <li>Have started to develop individual identity</li> <li>May still be very dependent on adults for support and direction</li> <li>Stage of transition where peers increasingly important</li> <li>May find death of peer very traumatic as own sense of security and safety threatened</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lots of questions (what will we do about vacation?)</li> <li>Physical complaints</li> <li>May try to act like adult so grief may go unrecognized</li> <li>The death may be intellectualized</li> <li>May act as if it doesn't matter</li> <li>May have fear of abandonment</li> <li>May be fearful</li> <li>May experience denial or anxiety</li> <li>May withdraw</li> <li>May have trouble concentrating</li> <li>May be reluctant to admit feelings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Offer opportunity to be included in funeral plans/rituals</li> <li>Offer physical activity outlets</li> <li>Create times to talk about emotions</li> <li>Normalize grief and related emotions</li> <li>Suggest ways to release emotions</li> <li>Answer questions honestly and directly</li> <li>Assess areas of guilt</li> <li>Acknowledge change in routine</li> <li>Provide reassurance concerning future</li> </ul>
Age	Understanding	Possible Behaviours	Helpful Responses
15-18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Typically able to use abstract reasoning</li> <li>Beginning to struggle with philosophical and broader aspects of death: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-is there an afterlife</li> <li>-suicide</li> <li>-war</li> </ul> </li> <li>Death may be seen as destruction of life, body, hopes and dreams</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Typically react strongly and emotionally to death, especially death of peer.</li> <li>Energy level may vary</li> <li>Responses to loss can be unpredictable: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Shock</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Offer opportunity to be included in funeral plans and rituals.</li> <li>Encourage involvement with family (if possible)</li> </ul>

A29

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May react similarly to adult but have fewer coping mechanisms.</li> <li>• May feel young and vulnerable, and may need to talk</li> <li>• May internalize feelings because fearful of outcome</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Anxiety</li> <li>-Denial</li> <li>-Distress</li> <li>-Anger</li> <li>-Depression</li> <li>-Withdrawal</li> <li>-Aggression</li> <li>• May experience emotional reactions to anniversaries, holidays, birthdays, other special times</li> <li>• May have decreased ability to concentrate and do school work.</li> <li>• May withdraw from friends/ family/ social activities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage expression of feelings</li> <li>• Encourage peer support which is often helpful</li> <li>• Involve other supportive adults</li> </ul>
Adult-hood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Usually able to abstractly process loss</li> <li>• Typically able to grieve depending on how previous losses have or have not been resolved</li> <li>• Effective support system is crucial in order to reconcile grief</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Energy level may vary during bereavement</li> <li>• Responses to loss can be unpredictable: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Shock</li> <li>-Anxiety</li> <li>-Denial</li> <li>-Distress</li> <li>-Anger,</li> <li>-Depression,</li> <li>-Withdrawal</li> <li>-Aggression.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• May experience emotional reactions to anniversaries holidays, birthdays, other special times</li> <li>• May experience decreased ability to concentrate/ work</li> <li>• May withdraw from friends/ family/ social activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer opportunity to be included in funeral plans and rituals</li> <li>• Encourage expression of feelings</li> <li>• Involve other supportive adults</li> </ul>

Some additional behaviour you may observe which are not specific to any age category are:

- Bodily complaints (headaches, changes in eating or sleeping etc.)
- Inability to focus
- Fatigue
- Possible overreaction to situations
- A child may seem happy and then suddenly tearful or distraught with no apparent precipitating event
- Stories, either verbal, pictorial, or written may reflect a theme of death or loss
- Child may take on an adult role in the family
- Changes in academic performance

Grief is normal. With time these feelings should become less intense as death is accepted and the child returns to a level of appropriate functioning that existed prior to the death.

If the following reactions are prolonged or prohibit a child from being able to adequately cope with normal routines; professional intervention or consultation is recommended.

REACTION	BEHAVIOUR
Child appears depressed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Onset of depression may be sudden or prolonged</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Excessive crying</li> <li>• Lack of energy</li> <li>• Lack of interest and motivation,</li> <li>• Attains no pleasure from activities,</li> <li>• Often tired,</li> <li>• Loss of appetite</li> <li>• Sleep disturbance</li> </ul>
Child denies death	Gives indication and/or believes that the deceased person is alive
Prolonged physical complaints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stomach aches</li> <li>• Headaches</li> </ul>
Prolonged change in typical behaviour	Unable to resume pre-death activities (sports, friends, school)
Shows persistent fear or anxiety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear of being alone</li> <li>• Difficulty taking risks</li> </ul>
Prolonged and severe sense of guilt	Prolonged sense of being the cause/or feeling responsible for the death ('I could have prevented the death')
Shows self-directed feelings of anger/sadness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Suicidal ideation or actions,</li> <li>• Self-harming</li> <li>• Perception of being worthless ('I'm no good')</li> </ul>
Exhibits continued hostility towards others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vandalism</li> <li>• Aggression</li> </ul>