

Children's Understanding of Death at Different Ages

Children under 2 years old

- Long before they are able to talk, babies are likely to react to upset and changes in their environment brought about by the disappearance of a significant person who responded to their needs on a daily basis.
- Toddlers might show a basic understanding of death when they see a dead bird or insect in the garden but they do not usually understand the implications of this, such as the dead bird cannot feel anything or won't ever get up again.

Children from 2 to 5 years old

- Tend to think very literally, therefore it is important to avoid offering explanations of death such as 'gone away' or 'gone to sleep' that may cause misunderstandings and confusion.
- Often struggle with abstract concepts like 'forever' and find it difficult to grasp that death is permanent. Their limited understanding may lead to an apparent lack of reaction when told about a death.

Children of primary school age

- Begin to develop an understanding that death is permanent and final. They may be fascinated with the physical aspects of death or the rituals surrounding it.
- May see death as a person who might 'come to get you' or 'catch you' if you are unlucky.
- Begin to develop their imagination and 'magical thinking', which reinforces the belief that their thoughts or actions caused the death and can lead them to fill in the gaps in their knowledge.
- Mostly have an awareness of death having a cause and being irreversible, but at younger ages do not necessarily see it as inevitable, particularly in relation to themselves.
- As they get older, begin to have a more mature understanding of death, realising that it is final, permanent, universal and an unavoidable part of life.
- Can become fearful as a result of their deepening realisation of the possibility of their own future death.

Adolescents

- Grief may be compounded by the struggles of adolescence, finding it hard to ask for support while trying to show the world they are independent.
- Often have their own beliefs and strongly held views, and may challenge the beliefs and explanations offered by others.
- May talk at length about the death, but seldom to those closest to them in the family.
- May cope with the awareness of their own mortality through risk-taking behaviour.