

Children's Understanding of Death

Bradford Educational Psychology Team

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CHILDREN'S REACTION TO DEATH

Children react very differently to death with the following factors being important:

- The circumstances of the death e.g. anticipated natural death or traumatic incident.
- Their closeness to the individual.
- The similarity between themselves and the deceased e.g. if the person is a child or adult etc.
- The reactions of the adults around them e.g. the level and nature of the emotional reaction etc.
- The level of understanding about the circumstances e.g. whether or not the death can be explained.
- The resultant changes in the child's life e.g. what real difference it makes to the child's life etc.

However, probably the most important factor is the child's perception of and understanding of death. This depends on the developmental level of the child and this document outlines the typical responses/understanding levels of children at different ages.

Two ways of representing this information are included:

- A written format listing reactions according to age.
 - A table format classifying the different ways in which children react cognitively, emotionally and physically by age.

CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING AND REACTIONS TO DEATH

Birth to Two Years

- Does not understand the finality of death.
- Can miss the presence of primary caregiver.
- Will react to loss by crying, altering eating/sleeping habits.
- Can become detached.

Two to Five years

- Does not understand the finality of death.
- Believes death can be reversed.
- Does not always have vocabulary to express grief.
- Feelings may be acted out in behaviour and play.
- May have more interest in dead things.
- May ask some questions over and over again.
- Reacts in light of their own past experiences of death.

Six to Nine Years

- Beginning to understand finality of death.
- Believes death only happens to others.
- Death is personified as ghosts or monsters.
- Engages in magical thinking, and may feel they caused death.
- Has strong feelings of loss.
- May lack vocabulary to express feelings.
- Often needs 'permission' to grieve, especially boys.

Nine to Twelve Years

- Understands finality of death.
- Has curiosity about the physical aspects of death.
- Has the vocabulary to express feelings, but often chooses not to.
- Needs 'permission' and encouragement to express feelings.
- May identify with deceased by imitating mannerisms.
- May have shortened attention span.

Thirteen to Eighteen years

- Has an adult understanding of death.
- Can express feelings, but often chooses not to.
- May philosophise about life and death.
- May search for the 'meaning' of death.
- Death affects whole life – school, home, relationships.
- May appear to be coping well when they are not.
- Are often thrust into the role of comforter.
- May participate in dangerous behaviour like drugs and alcohol.

See Klicker 1999: A Student Dies, a School Mourns – Dealing with Death and Loss in the School Community – ISBN 1-56032-742-1, publishers Taylor & Francis – Accelerated Development – Philadelphia USA

CHILDREN'S COGNITIVE, EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL RESPONSES TO DEATH

	Infant/Toddler	Key Stage 1	Key Stage 2	Adolescent
Cognitive Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Onset of attachment at about 6 months after birth Permanence of absence or death not understood Ability to conceptualise the word "death" is very limited Children begin to incorporate small "losses" into their lives Children are aware of the adult use of the word "death" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Able to classify, order and quantify events and objects but unable to give a rationale Concept of "life" and "death" established eg death equals separation Understand the state of death means not breathing, not moving, still etc Permanence of death still not established. Stage of "magical" thinking e.g. thinks thoughts/actions may be responsible for death 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Able to explain reasoning in a logical way Realisation that death can be applied to self Permanence of death established Death is understood as an ultimate reality Confusion about metaphors and euphemisms associated with death e.g. "gone", "asleep", "lost" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Abstract thought patterns established Interest in physical characteristics of death and dying Questions about How? Why? Own theories about what happens at death and beyond formed Interest in ethical issues eg abortion, euthanasia
Emotional Response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Separation anxiety Yearning and searching for the person who is not there Expression of sadness short-lived Can blame other people for death/departure Fantasises about being reunited with the dead person Rejection of affection from new primary carer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Excessive crying Unable to control emotions Poor concentration at school and play School refusal Illusions/hallucinations about the dead person – night terrors "Play out" death and dying 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anxiety about other people dying Disturbance in normal behaviour patterns More in control of emotional responses Inability to organise and to concentrate Stealing objects as "comfort" activity Capacity to sustain feelings of sadness for longer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Whole range of emotions displayed Feels embarrassed about being "different" Anxiety about the future e.g. material possessions and economics Inability to form new lasting relationships Rejection of affection from other people
Physical Response	<p>Children who have not developed verbal language may respond by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bedwetting Wetting by day Viral infections Disturbed sleep 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Restlessness Loss of appetite "Tummy-ache" psychosomatic illness Clinging behaviour Night terrors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aggression Changed behaviour Nail biting Sleep disturbance Physical illness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Eating disorders Challenging behaviour Physical illness Disturbed sleep Conflict Risk-taking behaviour Increased sexual or permissive behaviour

Additional Guidance

The following guidance is also available from the Educational Psychology Team (EPT) or Education Social Work Service (ESWS) and is downloadable from the EPT area on Bradford Schools Online.

- Critical Incident Guidance for Schools and Settings
- Critical Incident Guidance Individual Bereavement Planning Guide
- Critical Incident Guidance Major Incident Planning
- Supporting Bereaved Children Guidance for Carers