

Children and Young People's Understanding of Death

A child's understanding of death will vary with their age and stage of development. Younger children may not have the language to talk about their feelings, and adults need to interpret their behaviour to be able to offer appropriate support

Adolescents need support too. They may have the understanding and language, but they are often more unwilling to communicate with the adults around them!

Pre-school children

- Are influenced by emotions of adults around them. If their care givers are upset, they may get upset or try to comfort them.
- Will react to loss, rather than death, as they do not understand the meaning or finality of death –they think that the person can return or can be visited.
- Can transfer their attachment to another person quickly for security and could regress in language and behaviour
- May display sadness, but for short periods before escaping into play.
- Use play to act out feelings about the death and this is a healthy way to help them process what has happened

Will benefit from routine, boundaries, affection and reassurance

Primary school children

- Begin to fear death for themselves, and family and friends– health anxiety/separation anxiety
- Start to realise that death is final
- Can feel guilt and worry about magical thinking and thought-action fusion (i.e. thoughts/actions cause death).
- Have difficulty expressing complex feelings as they may not have the emotional language
- They may want to know the details of the situation and ask certain blunt questions. This will help them process what has happened. They may need to go over facts again and again.
- Can exhibit attention seeking or regressive behaviour
- Can use play to act out feelings about the death similar to pre-schoolers, and this will help in processing the situation
- Big emotions can make it difficult to concentrate (which can cause frustration)

Will benefit from routine, boundaries affection and reassurance.

Secondary school children

- Comprehend that death is final so can become depressed or feel overwhelmed
- Could become obsessed with thoughts of own death, or family and friends
- Could act recklessly in defiance of death, through drugs, alcohol and or sexual activity
- May dislike appearing different from peers so could reject offers of support (don't want to be singled out or different, instead want things to go back to how things were before the death)
- Can question/reject beliefs, values and religion or seek comfort and understanding from them
- Can look for control over, and choices about, how things are managed at home
- Could withdraw from social interactions
- Could become focussed in other areas an attempt to blot out pain (such as work, exercise, food etc.)
- Can get upset about ideas such as fairness or injustice associated with the loss

Will benefits from space and autonomy to process alongside openness and willing to talk about situation when they are ready!

FAMILYWORKS

COUNSELLING • MEDIATION • TRAINING