

Developmental Stages and Children's Responses to Grief

	Grief Reactions	Helpful Approaches
Ages 2 to 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Confusion, agitation at night, frightening dreams, regression. — Child often understands that a profound event has occurred. — Repeated questioning. — Child's understanding of death is limited. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Simple, honest words and phrases. — Reassurance. — Secure, loving environment. — Drawing, reading books, playing together. — Include in funeral rituals.
Ages 5 to 8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Wants to understand about death in a concrete way, but thinks, "Won't happen to me." — Denial, anger, sorrow. — Generally distressed, disoriented, confused. — May behave as though nothing has happened. — Desire to conform with peers. — May ask questions repeatedly. — May need regular physical activity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Simple, honest words and phrases. — Answer questions simply and honestly. — Look for confused thinking. — Offer physical outlets. — Reassure about future. — Drawings, reading books, playing together. — Include in funeral rituals.
Ages 8 to 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Shock, denial, anxiety, distress. — Façade of coping. — Finality of death understood. — Phobic behavior, morbid curiosity, peer conformity. — May need regular physical activity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Answer questions directly and honestly. — Reassure about future. — Create times to talk about feelings. — Offer physical outlets. — Reading. — Include in funeral plans and rituals.

Talking with Children About Death and Traumatic Situations

- Children do not have to know everything about death or a violent situation to come to some understanding about it.
- Be sensitive to children's questions, taking cues from what they ask and their level of cognitive and emotional development.
- Do not talk children out of their feelings. Rather, permit them to talk about their feelings.
- Children fear death from either incomplete thinking or lack of knowledge.
- Children's concerns do not always reach us through conversation. Sometimes they come obliquely through play.
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- Play is serious business for children and the fundamental way for them to work on their feelings.
- Our most important role is as a silent observer of play, staying nearby, but unobtrusive. Always make yourself available for conversation if the play leads naturally to talk.
- Children need to grieve in their own ways.
 - Withdrawing or misbehaving
 - Shouting
 - Beating an inanimate object
 - Kicking a cardboard box
- Show your understanding and caring when sharing news of a death with children. "This is a very sad and difficult time for everyone. You may see me cry, act upset or even angry. I am not angry with you. I love you very much. It's okay if you need to cry or be upset or angry also."
- Talk at the children's eye level. Touch or hold them when it is appropriate. Speak directly and avoid clichés. Avoid confusing terms such as *passed on*, *lost*, or *taken from us*. Children think in concrete terms. Words are not always necessary. Hugs and sitting close can say a lot.
- Explain the cause of death, why the body has stopped working. Children's fantasies may be far more frightening than reality. Do not be afraid to use the words *dead* or *dying*.