

# Developmental Stages

## AND CHILDREN'S RESPONSES TO GRIEF



Although grief is a unique experience for each human being, the ways in which grief is experienced and expressed by children are influenced by their developmental stage.

Developmental stages are fluid. One child might express their grief more like a child in a more advanced stage of development, or their behavior might be emblematic of a previous stage of development.

Children's grief is expressed differently from adult grief, so understanding the ways in which the child's stage of development impacts their grief across the lifespan will contribute to healthier outcomes.

### Birth – 2 Years

At this stage children lack the language and experience to understand death related concepts such as permanence or universality but do respond to changes in their caregiving environment.

#### Helpful Approaches

Find a consistent nurturing person to be present for the child if that primary caregiver has died.

Include children in some or all funeral rituals and conversations about the person who died.

#### Grief Responses

- Irritability; shock; despair.
- Changes in eating habits; toilet habits; sleep patterns.
- May cry more, or less.
- Fear of abandonment.



### 2 – 4 Years

Children in this stage lack an understanding of the permanence of death and may fully expect their person to return until they reach the next stage of development, or enough time goes by for learning to take place. They engage in Magical Thinking and attribute much of what occurs in their environment as a direct result of some action or thought of their own. They also lack the vocabulary to express their grief verbally in the form of questions or conversation, so they may act it out in play or through behaviors.

#### Grief Responses

- Confusion; separation anxiety; depressed or withdrawn; nightmares.
- Regression to an earlier stage of development.

#### Helpful Approaches

Offer direct, honest, and simple answers to questions about the death. Let children know who will be there to love and care for them in that person's absence.

Involve children in funerary rituals and ongoing rituals to help maintain the bond with the deceased, including talking about and sharing memories of the person who died. Offer choices, when possible, of how they might participate in funeral rituals, about what to wear, what to eat, etc. Provide a loving environment with time for play, drawing, and reading picture books about families who are grieving.

### 5 – 8 Years

At this stage of development children may struggle to understand death in a more concrete way. They may focus on the details of what happened and may still engage in the earlier type of magical thinking which led them to believe that the death was their fault. They may need to repeat questions to reach a full understanding of what is happening in the family. These children still lack a full vocabulary of feeling words, so they are likely to express their emotions and thoughts through physical movements or play.

#### Grief Responses

- Trouble focusing/ concentrating; difficulty sitting still; worry about the safety of others.
- Nightmares/intrusive thoughts; physical complaints; recreate the death through play.

#### Helpful Approaches

Use simple, direct words to talk about the death and answer questions. Offer physical outlets for big feelings such as anger, fear, and regret. Provide a structured environment with firm boundaries and limits in a gentle, caring way to let the child know that their environment is still safe and predictable. Offer opportunities for fun, family play, and reading grief-related books together. Engage in on-going mourning rituals, such as keeping a memory box to help the child maintain their bond with the deceased.



## 9 – 12 Years



Although these children still think concretely, they fully understand that death is permanent and irreversible. The tendency for egocentricity continues so children are likely to find ways to blame themselves for the death and continue to be fearful that other family members could die. They may be preoccupied with thoughts about the death and what happened to their person and have trouble concentrating.

### Grief Responses

- Understand finality of death; focus on concrete details of what happened to body; know death is universal and can happen to other family members.
- May have trouble concentrating.
- May have trouble sitting still.
- May have trouble with impulse control and self-regulation.
- Anger; sadness; guilt; regret; fear.

### Helpful Approaches

Include in funerary and on-going grief rituals to help maintain the bond with the deceased. Always respond to questions honestly. Reassure the child that they will be loved and cared for now and in the future, and by whom. Offer opportunities for self-expression through music, art, and/or writing. Offer physical outlets for their grief. Read books about other families who are grieving. Set and maintain firm boundaries and limits. Make yourself available to listen when they feel like talking. Try to stay calm and refrain from advice-giving. Stay in touch with teachers to make sure they are getting the support they need and are not falling behind.



## 13 – 18 Years

Adolescence is typified by the emergence of abstract thinking. Can now ask, “Why them?” and think about the death the way adults do but lack the ability to process their emotions in mature ways. They may choose ways to cope with their grief that can be unhealthy or dangerous. They can talk about their grief in deep and mature ways and benefit from peer support opportunities. May be asked to assume adult roles in the family or may assume parental role if they perceive their caregivers as too bereaved or needing assistance; this may alter their separation/individuation process.

### Grief Responses

- Sadness, denial; anger; anxiety; depression; trouble concentrating; academic problems; risk-taking behaviors; perfectionism.
- May prefer company of friends to that of family.
- Delays in separation/individuation process.
- Changes in appetite and/or sleep habits.

### Helpful Approaches

If the teen is reluctant to talk to their caregiver about the death, they should be encouraged to and provided with opportunities to speak with peers. As with the 9-12-year-olds, be present when they are ready to talk and listen in a calm and non-judgmental way. Recognize that they still need a chance to engage in age-appropriate activities with peers despite their ability to contribute to household duties. Let them know who will be there to love and care for them in your absence. Maintain clear boundaries and limits in a firm but caring way. Offer them choices in the same manner that you do with toddlers.



OUR HOUSE grief support groups reduce the isolation that grieving children experience and give them the support they need to move forward in their grieving process.

**Call now to ensure that no child grieves alone.**

*888-417-1444*

[ourhouse-grief.org](http://ourhouse-grief.org)