

Responses of different age groups

We want to protect our children from pain but we can risk excluding or isolating them. Children overhear conversations, read body language and are usually acutely aware that something is going on. It is impossible not to communicate with children.

What do they understand and how can we help?

Understanding of death will vary according to age and stage of development:



Babies – 3 years

Babies will miss people to whom they have become attached. This child has no concept of death as permanent. They understand leaving, but not time. They may believe that if they want someone back enough, they might return.

They need – physical comfort and consistency of care.

3 – 5 years

Children learn that people go away but they come back. Children of this age may understand that the person who has died has gone away, but they might expect them back. They may ask very direct questions and be interested in morbid details. They may regress in behaviour to that of a younger child.

They need – simple honest answers, keeping to routines and avoiding new changes if possible.



5 – 9 years

They begin to understand that death is forever. They experience more anxieties about their future care and survival of other parents or siblings. They may experience guilt, nightmares etc. Again behaviour can regress to that of a younger child.

They need – reassurance, affection, information, honesty, the knowledge where a carer/parent will be and the opportunity to express feelings.

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Children are limited in the words they can use to describe their feelings. They may show them in fits of temper, moments of deep sadness or in periods of extreme anxiety or clinging behaviour. More often they may show their feelings in less obvious ways, for example, by becoming more naughty or becoming quite babyish again; or in a physical way by wetting the bed or by getting unexplained tummy pains/headaches.

Some children show little of their feelings, if they are themselves frightened of them or if they imagine that grown ups may get cross or upset by them.

9 – 12 years

They have a mature concept. More likely to get depressed, as they realise the parent will not be around. They also worry about practical needs and the future.

They need – clear boundaries for their behaviour, understanding and someone to listen, often using peers or short term counselling



Adolescence onwards

They have a real understanding of the facts of death. Their opportunity to rebel against the parents is thwarted by an untimely death. They take risks in their behaviour and can at times seem unreachable.

Children cannot cope with the emotional intensity of grieving. They tend to dip in and out, one moment being upset or angry and the next wanting to play with friends. This can be interpreted as not caring. This has been likened to 'dipping in and out of deep puddles where adults remain in the flowing river'.

Remember...



They may hide their feelings until things settle down



They may need to be treated as you would a younger child



They also need to have fun!



Perfect parents do not exist – do what you can!