



Lauren Gaspar, LCSW

Licensed Clinical Social Worker

4131 Spicewood Springs Road

Suite F1

Austin, TX 78759

512.296.7258

The Development of Children's Understanding of Death and Dying

Children's understanding of death and dying changes as they grow and mature. These are meant only as guidelines because we must take into consideration where each individual child is in their understanding of death and dying. Some children may be more developmentally advanced in their understanding and many will regress developmentally when faced with loss.

Under Age 3

Although we know that children this age have no cognitive understanding of death, they can feel the reactions of those around them and sense that something is wrong. They do feel the separation of loss and will show they are distressed.

Preschool (Ages 3-5)

These children see death as temporary and reversible. They believe the dead live on only under changed circumstances. For example: on a cloud or in a city called Heaven or in a box under the ground connected to other boxes by tunnels. They may be upset if someone they knew in a wheelchair dies and is buried without their chair. "Don't they know she can't get around without her wheelchair?" Children will ask many questions about how one lives on. "Maybe grandma can't come to visit but she can call us from heaven, right?" No matter how well death is explained, many will persist in their belief about its reversibility. Preschool children are very concrete and literal in their thinking. We must be very careful with the words we choose when talking with them. They may ask the same questions over and over to gain reassurance that the situation has not changed. They may show increased clinginess, regressed behaviors, separation anxiety, sleep problems, anger, and aggressiveness. They express anger through their play.

Latency (Ages 6-8)

Children in their developmental stage know that death is irreversible but it's not going to happen to them. They see death as a person or spirit that comes to get you if you aren't fast or clever enough to escape. From their perspective, three groups of people die: the elderly, the handicapped, and the "klutzes". These people can't escape death because they can't "out run" death. In an effort to feel different and therefore safe, children will often find some specific way, sometimes negatively, to differentiate themselves from people who die. For example: If a friend who always wore a baseball cap

dies, his friend may not want to wear a baseball hat. He wants to be different to keep himself safe. They like to play games which give them power and show they are strong like superheroes. They may regress in their behavior and have difficulty sleeping. They may have fears of being alone and show aggressive behavior.

Preadolescents (ages 9-11)

These children have a more adult understanding of death and dying. They know that death is final, irreversible and universal. They understand the biological aspects of death, that something goes wrong internally. They are very interested in rituals and how the world will change because of the death of a particular person. They tend to intellectualize death and dying as a way of coping. They seem to have their thoughts more available than their feelings. They may appear cold and crass.

Adolescents (12-up)

Adolescents have an adult conception of death, but an actual death shatters their view of immortality. They believe they are invincible and that nothing “bad” will happen to them or their friends. They often engage in risk taking behavior, seeming to test the limits of that immortality. When a friend does die they are enraged. Unlike preadolescents, adolescents can be highly emotional and may respond by sobbing, angry outbursts, and destructive behavior. They do not want to be different from their peers and may be embarrassed by a death of a parent or sibling. They need to grieve with their friends and ritualize in their own way. Although they may not be sharing their grief with adults, it is extremely important that the adults in an adolescent’s life are there for them in care and support.