

Developmental Stages of Grief and How Caregivers can Help



INFANTS TO AGE 2:

Even though they don't understand death, babies and toddlers feel loss deeply, reacting to changes in routine and caregiver emotions. Signs of grief include irritability, crying, changes in eating/sleeping, and clinginess. To help, maintain consistent routines, offer plenty of physical comfort and reassurance and respond to their distress with empathy.

AGES 2-6 (PRESCHOOL):

At this age, children often confuse death with sleep or a temporary absence, sometimes believing their own thoughts caused the death. They may show grief through anxiety, repetitive questions, tantrums, bedwetting, or regressing to younger behaviors. To help, use clear, direct language about death, reassure them they are not to blame, maintain routines and encourage play as an emotional outlet. Always invite and answer their questions honestly and simply.

AGES 6-9 (SCHOOL AGE):

Children in this age group start to understand death as final, but may not grasp its universality, sometimes seeing it as a scary, external force. Their grief can manifest as fear of school, learning difficulties, aggression, health worries, or physical complaints like headaches. Support them by being honest with simple explanations, acknowledging all their feelings (even anger), encouraging expression through drawing or talking, helping them safely release anger and creating memory-making opportunities.

AGES 9-12 (PRE-TEEN)

Pre-teens grasp that death is final, irreversible and universal, often intellectualizing it or showing curiosity about details, and may worry about others' safety. Their grief can involve intense, unpredictable emotions like anger, sadness, guilt, difficulty discussing loss, or changes in eating. To help, remain open and honest, allow them to express feelings in their own way, encourage healthy coping through hobbies, involve them in memorial activities if desired, and help them connect with trusted adults and peers.

ADOLESCENTS (13+)

Teenagers understand the abstract and existential impact of death, often feeling isolated and believing their grief is misunderstood. They may reject traditional support and show a wide range of intense emotions, including social withdrawal, risky behaviors, academic decline, or substance use. To support them, respect their need for space while remaining available, encourage healthy peer and mentor connections, validate their feelings without judgment, support their personal memorialization, and recommend professional help if they are significantly struggling.

HELPFUL GENERAL TIPS:

- **Be Honest and Direct:** Use clear, age-appropriate language about death. Avoid euphemisms that can cause confusion or fear.
- **Validate Their Feelings:** Let them know it's okay to feel sad, angry, confused, or whatever emotions arise. Model healthy expression of your own grief.
- **Maintain Routines:** Predictable schedules provide a sense of security and stability during a chaotic time.
- **Encourage Expression:** Offer various outlets for grief, such as talking, drawing, writing, playing, or listening to music.
- **Create Memories:** Help them remember the person who died through stories, photos, memory boxes, or special traditions.
- **Be Patient:** Grief is not linear. Children may grieve in spurts and re-grieve as they reach new developmental stages.
- **Provide Reassurance:** Assure them they are loved, safe and you will continue to care for them.
- **Seek Professional Support:** If a child's grief is overwhelming, prolonged or significantly impacting their daily life, consider connecting with a grief counselor or support group.