

## Developmental Stages of Understanding Death

| Age           | Concepts and Beliefs   | Emotions   | Possible Behaviors   | How to Help   |
|---------------|--|--|--|---|
| Birth-2 years | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No understanding of death</li> <li>Cannot verbalize feelings</li> <li>Aware of absence of loved one</li> <li>Notices changes in routine and family emotions</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Longing</li> <li>Misses contact, sounds, smell and sight of loved one</li> <li>Fear of being abandoned</li> <li>Anxiety</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Crying</li> <li>Sickness</li> <li>Indigestion</li> <li>Thrashing</li> <li>Rocking</li> <li>Throwing</li> <li>Sucking, biting</li> <li>Sleeplessness</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Physical contact, cuddling and reassurance</li> <li>Maintain routines</li> <li>Meet immediate physical needs</li> <li>Include the child in the mourning process when possible</li> <li>Be gentle &amp; patient</li> </ul>  |
| 3-5 years     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No understanding of permanence of death</li> <li>To be dead is to be sleeping or on a trip</li> <li>May wonder what deceased is doing</li> <li>Can understand that biological processes have stopped, but sees this as temporary and reversible</li> <li>May wonder what will happen if the other parent dies</li> <li>Magical thinking and fantasies, often worse than realities</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fear</li> <li>Sad</li> <li>Insecure</li> <li>Confused</li> <li>Anger</li> <li>Irritable</li> <li>Agitated</li> <li>Worried</li> <li>Guilty</li> <li>Happy</li> <li>Playful</li> <li>Hopeful</li> </ul>                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regressive behaviors</li> <li>Repetitive questions</li> <li>Withdrawn</li> <li>Plays out scenes of death, change &amp; feelings</li> <li>Interested in dead things</li> <li>Acts as if death never happened</li> <li>Intense dreams</li> <li>Physical complaints</li> <li>Crying</li> <li>Fighting</li> </ul>                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Allow the child to regress</li> <li>Give physical contact</li> <li>Encourage children to play &amp; have fun</li> <li>Allow safe ways to express feelings</li> <li>Give simple &amp; truthful answers to questions</li> <li>Maintain structures &amp; routines</li> <li>Answer repetitive questions</li> <li>Let child cry</li> <li>Talk (reflective listening)</li> <li>Include child in family rituals &amp; mourning</li> </ul> |
| 6-9 Years     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understands that death is final</li> <li>Interested in the biology of death</li> <li>Death associated with bodily harm, mutilation &amp; decay</li> <li>His or her thoughts, actions or words caused the death</li> <li>Death is punishment</li> <li>Forming spiritual concepts</li> <li>Who will care for me if my caregiver dies</li> <li>Thinks about life's milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sad</li> <li>Angry</li> <li>Lonely</li> <li>Withdrawn</li> <li>Worried</li> <li>Anxious</li> <li>Irritable</li> <li>Confused</li> <li>Guilty</li> <li>Fearful</li> <li>Ashamed</li> <li>Happy</li> <li>Hopeful</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regressive behaviors</li> <li>Specific questioning – looking for details</li> <li>Acts as if the death never happened</li> <li>Hides feelings</li> <li>Withdrawal</li> <li>Nightmares/sleep disturbance</li> <li>Concentration difficulties</li> <li>Changes in grades</li> <li>Talks about physical aspects of illness or death</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Keep child informed</li> <li>Allow regressive behavior &amp; offer comfort</li> <li>Expect &amp; accept mood swings</li> <li>Encourage expression of feelings through writing, art, dance, music, sports, etc.</li> <li>Peer support groups</li> <li>Give choice about involvement</li> </ul>  |

|                                |   |  |   |  |
|--------------------------------|---|--|---|--|
| <p>9-12 years</p>              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understands the finality of death</li> <li>• Denial</li> <li>• His/her words, thoughts or actions caused the death</li> <li>• Thinks about life's milestones without the deceased</li> <li>• High death awareness (death may happen again)</li> <li>• What if my caregiver dies?</li> <li>• Formulating spiritual concepts</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional turmoil heightened by physical changes</li> <li>• Shock</li> <li>• Sad</li> <li>• Angry</li> <li>• Confused</li> <li>• Lonely</li> <li>• Vulnerable</li> <li>• Fear</li> <li>• Worried</li> <li>• Guilty</li> <li>• Isolated</li> <li>• Abandoned</li> <li>• Anxious</li> <li>• Happy</li> <li>• Hopeful</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regressive behaviors</li> <li>• Hides feelings</li> <li>• Acts like death never happened</li> <li>• Aggressive acting out</li> <li>• Withdrawal</li> <li>• Nightmares/sleep disturbance</li> <li>• Concentration difficulties</li> <li>• Declining or greatly improved grades</li> <li>• Talks about physical aspects of illness or death</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep child informed</li> <li>• Allow regressive behavior &amp; offer comfort</li> <li>• Expect &amp; accept mood swings</li> <li>• Encourage expression of feelings through writing, art, music, dance, sports, etc.</li> <li>• Peer support groups</li> <li>• Listen and talk</li> <li>• Answer questions truthfully</li> <li>• Offer physical contact</li> <li>• Give choices about involvement in caretaking and preparation for the death</li> <li>• Offer books about illness and death</li> </ul>   |
| <p>12 years and up (Teens)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understands the finality &amp; Universality of death</li> <li>• Denial</li> <li>• His/her words, thoughts, actions caused the death</li> <li>• Thinks about life's milestones without the deceased</li> <li>• High death awareness</li> <li>• May sense own impending death</li> <li>• Need to be in control of feelings</li> <li>• If I show my feelings, I will be weak</li> <li>• Internal conflict about dependence &amp; desiring independence</li> <li>• May utilize spiritual concepts to cope</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highly self-conscious about being different due to grief</li> <li>• Shock</li> <li>• Sad</li> <li>• Anger</li> <li>• Confused</li> <li>• Lonely</li> <li>• Vulnerable</li> <li>• Fear</li> <li>• Worried</li> <li>• Guilty</li> <li>• Abandoned</li> <li>• Anxious</li> <li>• Happy</li> <li>• Hopeful</li> </ul>             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Occasional regressive behavior</li> <li>• Mood swings</li> <li>• Hides feelings</li> <li>• Acts like death never happened</li> <li>• Acts out role confusion</li> <li>• Withdrawal</li> <li>• Nightmares &amp; sleep disturbance</li> <li>• Concentration difficulties</li> <li>• Changes in grades</li> <li>• Impulsive &amp; high risk behaviors</li> <li>• Changes in peer group</li> <li>• Fighting, screaming, arguing</li> <li>• Changes in eating patterns</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep teen informed</li> <li>• Allow regressive behavior &amp; offer comfort</li> <li>• Expect &amp; accept mood swings</li> <li>• Allow hidden feelings unless risk of harm</li> <li>• Encourage expression of feelings through writing, art, music, dance, sports, etc.</li> <li>• Support relationships with understanding adults</li> <li>• Listen and talk</li> <li>• Answer questions truthfully</li> <li>• Share your grief</li> <li>• Watch for high risk behavior</li> <li>• Encourage peer support</li> <li>• Offer physical contact</li> <li>• Allow choices about involvement</li> </ul> |