

# Developmental Ages/Stages and Possible Reactions to Illness or Death

Adapted from Metro Denver Hospice

Age	Concepts of Death	Feelings	Behaviors	How to Help
Birth - 2 Years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Separation/Absence</li> <li>• Reacts to change in routine and emotional climate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Miss and ache for sound, smell, sight or feel of someone</li> <li>• Fears of being abandoned</li> <li>• General anxiety</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thrashing, rocking, throwing</li> <li>• Crying</li> <li>• Sucking, biting</li> <li>• Sleeplessness</li> <li>• Sickliness</li> <li>• Indigestion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical contact and reassurance</li> <li>• Attend to immediate physical needs</li> <li>• Maintain routines</li> <li>• Include the child in the mourning process when possible and appropriate</li> <li>• Be patient</li> </ul>
2 - 5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Death is temporary and reversible</li> <li>• Finality of death is not evident</li> <li>• To be dead is to be sleeping or on a trip</li> <li>• May wonder what deceased is doing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sad</li> <li>• Anxious</li> <li>• Insecure</li> <li>• Withdrawn</li> <li>• Confusion</li> <li>• Angry</li> <li>• Scared</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crying</li> <li>• Fighting</li> <li>• Interested in dead things</li> <li>• Acts as if death never happened</li> <li>• Regressive behaviors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Answer repetitive questions</li> <li>• Give simple and truthful answers to questions</li> <li>• Include child in family rituals and in mourning process</li> <li>• Provide safe ways to express feeling</li> <li>• Maintain structure and routines</li> <li>• Encourage children to play and to have fun</li> <li>• Tolerate the child's need to regress for a while (being held) sleeping with others, thumb sucking)</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very egocentric and concrete thinking</li> <li>• Magical thinking and fantasies, often worse than realities</li> <li>• Understanding is limited</li> <li>• Sees death as loss of love and protection</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cranky</li> <li>• Agitated</li> <li>• Abandoned</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Repetitive questions</li> <li>• Expressing strong feelings in his/her sleep and dreams</li> <li>• Expressing feeling through play</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain structure and routines</li> <li>• Encourage children to play and to have fun</li> <li>• Tolerate the child's need to regress for a while (being held) sleeping with others, thumb sucking)</li> </ul>
6 - 9 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thinks about the finality of death</li> <li>• Thinks about the biological processes of death</li> <li>• Death is associated with bodily harm, mutilation and disintegration</li> <li>• Personify death - a spirit, monster, grim reaper, ghost gets you when you die</li> <li>• Who will care for me if my caregiver dies</li> <li>• My actions or words caused the illness or death</li> <li>• Death is punishment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sad</li> <li>• Anxious</li> <li>• Withdrawn</li> <li>• Confusion</li> <li>• Angry</li> <li>• Scared</li> <li>• Cranky</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aggressive acting out</li> <li>• Withdrawal</li> <li>• Nightmares/sleep disturbances</li> <li>• Acting as if the death never happened</li> <li>• Lack of concentration</li> <li>• Declining or greatly improved grades</li> <li>• Regressive behaviors</li> <li>• Specific questioning - looking for details</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Answer questions truthfully</li> <li>• Look for confused thinking</li> <li>• Encourage expression of feelings</li> <li>• Offer physical outlets</li> <li>• Encourage drawing, reading, playing, art, music, dance, acting, sports.</li> <li>• Physical contact</li> <li>• Have intentional times to grieve together</li> <li>• Let child choose how to be involved in the death and mourning process</li> <li>• Find peer support for the child</li> <li>• Work with school to tailor workload</li> <li>• Talk</li> </ul>

<p>9 - 12 years</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding of the finality and universality of death</li> <li>• Death may happen again</li> <li>• What will happen if my caregiver dies</li> <li>• My actions and words caused the illness or death.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerable</li> <li>• Anxious</li> <li>• Scared</li> <li>• Lonely</li> <li>• Confused</li> <li>• Angry</li> <li>• Sad</li> <li>• Abandoned</li> <li>• Guilty</li> <li>• Fearful</li> <li>• Worried</li> <li>• Isolated</li> <li>• Shock</li> <li>• Denial</li> <li>• Emotional turmoil heightened by physical changes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aggressive acting out</li> <li>• Withdrawal</li> <li>• Talks about physical aspects of illness or death.</li> <li>• Acts like illness or death never happened</li> <li>• Does not show feelings</li> <li>• Nightmares/sleep disturbances</li> <li>• Lack of concentration</li> <li>• Declining or greatly improved grades</li> <li>• Regressive behavior</li> <li>• Changing behavior</li> <li>• Acting out role confusion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Answer questions</li> <li>• Expect and accept mood swings</li> <li>• Give choices about how to be involved in death and mourning rituals</li> <li>• Find peer support groups</li> <li>• Encourage expression of feelings and offer outlets for them</li> <li>• Encourage reading, writing, art, music, sports</li> <li>• Talk</li> </ul>
<p>12 years and up (Teenagers)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding of finality of death</li> <li>• If I show my feelings, I will be weak</li> <li>• I need to be in control of my feelings</li> <li>• Can sense own impending death</li> <li>• Self-centered and thus have an exaggerated sense of their own role in regards to the death.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerable</li> <li>• Anxious</li> <li>• Scared</li> <li>• Lonely</li> <li>• Confused</li> <li>• Angry</li> <li>• Sad</li> <li>• Abandoned</li> <li>• Guilty</li> <li>• Fearful</li> <li>• Worried</li> <li>• Isolated</li> <li>• Shock</li> <li>• Denial</li> <li>• Depression</li> <li>• Highly self-conscious about being different due to grief</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impulsive behavior</li> <li>• Fighting, screaming and arguing</li> <li>• High risk behavior</li> <li>• Grieving for what might have been</li> <li>• Acts like the illness or death never happened</li> <li>• Lack of concentration</li> <li>• Changes in grades</li> <li>• Sleep disturbances</li> <li>• Changes in eating patterns</li> <li>• Changes in peer groups</li> <li>• Acting out role confusion</li> <li>• Conflict within teen about moving to independence and remaining dependent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expect the thoughts and feelings of the teen to be contradictory and inconsistent</li> <li>• Allow their coping behavior to cover their grief if it is harmless to themselves and others</li> <li>• Encourage expression of feelings and give outlets for them</li> <li>• Look for high risk behavior</li> <li>• Encourage relationships with other supportive adults</li> <li>• Listen</li> <li>• Display honest grief, share in discussions</li> <li>• Answer questions truthfully</li> <li>• Give choices about involvement in death and mourning rituals</li> <li>• Encourage peer support groups</li> <li>• Talk</li> </ul>