



HOW CHILDREN UNDERSTAND DEATH AT DIFFERENT AGES

*Supporting a Child According to Their
Developmental Understanding*

A child's understanding of death develops gradually. Age matters, but development, temperament, previous experiences, culture, faith, and the circumstances of the death also shape what a child understands. Knowing the child's developmental level can help adults choose explanations that are honest without giving more information than the child is ready to absorb.

YOUNG CHILDREN: THINKING IN CONCRETE TERMS

Preschool-age children may see death as temporary or reversible and may repeatedly ask when the person is coming back. They often interpret language literally. Clear explanations about the body no longer working can reduce confusion caused by phrases such as “lost,” “passed away,” or “went to sleep.”

WHAT YOU MAY NOTICE

- Young children may ask the same questions many times as they try to understand permanence.
- School-age children may become more curious about how and why the death happened.
- Adolescents may understand death much like adults but wrestle with fairness, identity, meaning, independence, or the future.

GENTLE REMINDER

There is no single conversation that explains death forever. Children often need information repeated and expanded as their understanding grows.

HOW ADULTS CAN HELP

Begin with what the child already knows. Ask, “What do you think happened?” or “What are you wondering about?” Then give a short, truthful answer and allow the child's next question to guide the conversation. It is fine to say, “I don't know,” when an answer is uncertain.

WORDS THAT CAN HELP

For a younger child: “Grandpa died. His body stopped working, so he cannot breathe, eat, talk, or feel pain anymore.”
For an older child: “You can ask me anything about what happened. I will tell you what I know, and if I don't know, I will tell you that too.”

A DEEPER LOOK

Children may understand one part of death before another. Professionals often describe several concepts that develop over time: death is permanent, living things eventually die, a dead body no longer functions, and death has physical causes. A child's questions can offer clues about which ideas they are still working to understand.





AS CHILDREN GROW, GRIEF CAN CHANGE

A child who lost a parent at age five may revisit that loss at ten, sixteen, or adulthood with a different understanding. New developmental stages can create new grief because the child can now comprehend aspects of the loss that were unavailable to them earlier.

This does not mean the child has failed to grieve. It means development has given the loss new meaning.

- Adults can continue the conversation over time rather than treating one explanation as the final conversation about death.
- A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION
- WHEN MORE SUPPORT MAY HELP

A THOUGHT TO CARRY WITH YOU

Give the child enough truth for today, and leave the door open for tomorrow's questions.

If a child's questions, fears, or changes in functioning remain intense or interfere with everyday life, seek guidance from a qualified professional who understands child development and bereavement.

REMEMBERING DEVELOPMENT MATTERS

Developmental descriptions are guides, not rigid rules. Two children of the same age may understand death differently. Listen closely to the child's own words and questions rather than assuming what they know based only on age.

SUPPORTING THE CHILD IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Return to the subject naturally when questions arise. Books, drawings, family photographs, and simple conversations can help children build understanding over time. Keep explanations consistent among the adults who care for the child whenever possible.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

What does this child seem to understand about death right now? What question are they asking - with words or behavior - that may need a clear, simple answer?

A GENTLE CLOSING

A child's understanding will grow. Adults can grow the conversation with them - offering clear information, reassurance, and an open invitation to ask again whenever something feels confusing.

With heartfelt compassion,
Linda Findlay
Founder, Mourning Discoveries

