

Grief & Development

How children understand and process death at different ages

Infants

Infants do not understand death, but can react to the absence of caregiver(s), changes in routine, and unmet needs. You may see:

- Increased irritability
- Difficulty with separation
- Increased clinginess
- Regressive behaviors

Toddlers (1-2 years)

Toddlers may display similar reactions to infants. You may see:

- Increased irritability
- Difficulty in separation
- Regressive behaviors
- Trouble going to sleep

Pre-Schoolers (3-6 years)

Preschoolers do not fully understand death. Kids at this stage are focused on themselves and imaginative play. You may see:

- Repetitive questions
- Bad dreams/nightmares

- Believing their actions caused the death
- Displaying understanding through play and other creative outlets
- Behavioral outbursts

School Aged (7-12 years)

School aged start to understand the finality of loss. You may see:

- More detail seeking questions
- Fear of death
- Using Tv/movies/friends to try to understand their own experiences on their own
- Academic struggles

Teens (13+)

Teens understand death the way adults do. But they still need support. You may see:

- Change in social behaviors
- Loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities
- Risk taking behaviors

