

Developmental Considerations of Children's Grief

AGE	DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE/TASK	CONCEPT OF DEATH	GRIEF RESPONSE	SIGNS OF DISTRESS	POSSIBLE INTERVENTION
2 - 4	Egocentric. Believes world revolves around them. Narcissistic. No cognitive understanding. Pre-conceptual, unable to Grasp concepts.	Seen as abandonment. Seen as reversible not permanent. Common statements, "Did you know my daddy died – when will he be home?"	Intensive response but brief. Very present oriented. Most aware of altered patterns of care.	Regression: Eating and sleeping disorders - bedwetting.	Short interactions. Frequent repetition. Comforting. Touching.
4 - 7	Gaining sense of autonomy. Exploring world outside of self. Gaining language. Fantasy thinking//wishing. Initiative phase; seeing self as initiator. Concerns of guilt.	Death still seen as reversible. Great personification of death. Feelings of responsibility because of wishes, thoughts. Common statements, "It's my fault; I was mad at her & wished she'd die."	Verbalization. Great concern with process. How? Why? Repetitive questioning.	Regression: Nightmares, sleeping & eating disturbances. Violent play. Attempts to take on role of person who died.	Symbolic play. Drawings/Stories Allow/encourage expression of energy feelings and anger. Talk about it.
7 - 11	Concrete – Operation. Industry vs. inferiority. Beginning of socialization. Development of cognitive ability. Beginning of logical thinking.	Death as punishment. Fear of bodily harm; mutilation. This is a difficult transition period – still want to see death as reversible but beginning to see it as final.	Specific questioning. Desire for complete detail. Concerned with how others are responding. What is the right way? How should they be responding? Starting to have ability to mourn and understand mourning.	Regression: problems in school, withdrawal from friends. Acting out. Sleeping and eating disturbance. Overwhelming concern with body. Suicidal thoughts (desire to join one who died). Role confusion.	Answer questions. Encourage expression of range of feelings. Encourage/allow control. Be available, but allow alone time. Symbolic play. TALK ABOUT IT!
11-18	Formal, Operational Problem Solving. Abstract thinking. Integration of ones own personality.	"ADULT" Approach. Ability to abstract. Beginning to truly conceptualize death. Work at making sense of teachings.	Depression. Denial. Repression. More often willing to talk to people outside of family. Traditional mourning.	Depression. Anger. Anger directed toward parents. Non-compliance. Rejection of former teachings. Role confusion. Acting out.	Encourage verbalization. Do not take control. Encourage self-motivation. Listen. Be available. Do not attempt to take grief away.