



Northumberland

County Council

Children's age and understanding of death

The following information considers the developmental stage of children's development and how this can impact upon their ability to understand what is happening. Although the information refers to 'death', a child who has experienced a loss will have the same type of understanding.

Very young children and babies

If a significant death occurs in the life of a child aged less than 2 years, they will not have much language to express their loss. However even babies and very young children are aware that people they were attached to have gone and experience the dawning realisation that they are never coming back. Babies can cry inconsolably if they feel unsafe when a parent goes out of the room or leaves them for longer than the baby wants. Permanent loss can be expressed in the same way or through listlessness, quietness, a decrease in activity or lack of sleep.

Age 2-5 years

In this age range children view death as a kind of sleep; the person is alive but in some limited way. They do not fully separate death from life and may believe that the person who died continues to live, for instance in the ground where he or she was buried. They will often ask very practical questions about the activities of the dead person, for instance how are they eating, going to the toilet, breathing or playing. Young children can acknowledge physical death but consider it a temporary or gradual event, reversible and not final. Because they do not understand that death is permanent they may say 'I know mummy's dead but she will be coming back for my birthday'

Younger children do not develop strategies to help them remember until they are approximately 7. Children need to be given memory prompts, such as stories repeated over and over, so they are able to recall memories of the person who has died. Without those prompts young children will find it difficult to remember.

Aged 6-12 years

Children in this age range begin to develop a more mature understanding of death and life and are becoming aware that everyone dies one day, including themselves.

They want to know more about the actual cause of death. At this age children like to feel that the world is an ordered place with routine and structure playing a significant part. They are beginning to move away from the family to make important relationships with other children and school. The death of someone close can easily throw them back to feeling unsafe and to being more dependent. They may feel less calm emotionally and more like a younger, preschool child who is up and down in their feelings.

Teenagers

Under ordinary circumstances teenagers go through many changes in their body image, behaviour, attachments and feelings. As they break away from parents/carers to develop their own identities, conflicts often arise within the family system; life can become even more complex when a person they are close to or know dies. Experience of loss could worsen teenagers' co-existing struggle to find meaning in their life and make sense of their life as well as their current and future place in the world. Teenagers will grieve but may work hard at hiding their feelings fearing vulnerability and can feel insecure just when starting to separate from family.