

Keystones of Grief for Different Developmental Ages

The following chart outlines how a child’s developmental age can impact their understanding and experience of grief. It is meant to serve as a guide for parents and guardians supporting a child or teen in grief, but — of course — just as children grieve their own way, they also develop at their own pace and may match descriptions for varying developmental ages.

Developmental Age	Understanding	Experience
Infant & Toddler BIRTH – 2 YEARS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have no cognitive understanding of death • Lack a language to express themselves • Live in the moment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May be unsettled, upset • Search or long for the person who died • Might want to be held more often • Might have trouble sleeping
Early Childhood 3 – 5 YEARS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have limited or no understanding of death • Do not understand the permanence of death • Are potentially aware that someone is missing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask repetitive questions and need to be told multiple times that the person has died • Experience “magical thinking” about death • May have periods of crying, sadness, and acting out, followed by periods of acting as if nothing happened • Experience regressive behaviors (thumb-sucking, bedwetting, baby-talk)
Later Childhood 6 – 8 YEARS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are developing an understanding of the concept of death, but still do not see death as permanent • Might feel responsible for the death, thinking that something they did (or did not do) caused their person to die • May think that death happens only to old people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worry about who else might die (other parent or other family members) • Feel responsible • Have bouts of sadness and at other times are seemingly “normal” • Have difficulty concentrating in school • May have a lot of questions for the adults in their lives • Express their grief through play
Preteen 9 – 12 YEARS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the concept of death • Often understand the finality of death and that death is universal • Hold onto some of their child-like understandings of death (in transition) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Might express sadness, anger, and intense feelings about the person’s death • May be curious about the dead body and what happens to a person after they die • May ask a lot of questions about the circumstances of the death • Worry about who else might die or that they might die
Teen 13 – 17 YEARS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are challenged by the death, since it contradicts their perception that they are invincible • Have a more adult-like understanding of death and the ability to understand abstract concepts • Have a personal view of death and ideas about what happens after someone dies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience varied reactions — intense emotions of sadness, anger, and shock, or will show little to no emotion • Do not like to be identified as a “grieving person” • Seek support and connection with their peers over family • Might take on adult responsibilities around the home • Like to appear in control and not in need of support



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