

How Children Understand Death

One of the primary factors that influences the ways in which students react to the death of a peer is their age. Just as a child's understanding of how things in the world increases with age, so, too, does his or her understanding of the realities of death. Research has outlined a series of stages that can be roughly correlated with age to explain how children conceptualize and understand death.

Age	Identifying Feature
Up to five	Death is temporary
Five to nine	Death is not universal
Nine through adolescence	Death is both permanent and universal

Nagy, M. "The Child's Theories Concerning Death." *Journal of Genetic Psychology* 73 (1948): 3–27.

Let's look at each of these stages individually.

Birth to Age Five

Children in this age group do not understand that death is both permanent and irreversible. While they do recognize that life changes when someone dies, there is an assumption that life simply continues for the deceased in a different, perhaps limited, way that the child cannot see. There is also a sense that, like the flowers that return every spring, the deceased, too, will return at some future time. Unfortunately, well-meaning adults often contribute to this immature level of understanding with statements like "Your daddy has gone on a long trip" (from which there is the expectation of return) or "God took your little brother to be an angel in heaven." Because children at this age think in very concrete terms, metaphor or abstraction is way over their heads. They can also be confused by some of the other euphemisms adults use to describe loss events, like miscarriages. One little boy was terrified to carpool with a neighbor after hearing that she had recently "lost her baby." "If she could lose her baby," he told his mother, "how will she keep track of me?"

Age Five to Nine

After age five, children's understanding of death begins its movement to maturity. There is now an appreciation that death is final—when someone dies, they are gone forever. The protective feature that is retained is the belief that death is not universal—everyone else will die, but the child will not. Death often becomes identified with darkness or night, or personified as a "Boogey Man" or monster who stalks victims at night. If you look closely at children's play through the ages of five to nine, it often reflects their attempts at death

mastery. From play guns to space aliens, the themes of death and survival are reenacted again and again. Jokes about death and dying are also commonplace and language about death tends to be precise. One little girl carefully reported to her mother that she had been scared “half to death” by an amusement park ride.

Age Nine through Adolescence

At approximately age nine, children arrive at a mature and adult cognitive understanding of death—that it is final and inevitable, that it happens to everyone, and that the dead don’t return. As they age into adolescence, however, youth begin their attempts to deny death. At no other time in the life cycle is death as emotionally unsettling as it is during adolescence. Developmentally, teens are struggling with answering the critical question “Who am I?” For teens, having to factor in the reality of death can make all the work it takes to figure out who they are and what they want to do with their lives seem fruitless.

One of the ways that teens keep the reality of death in the distance is by simply not thinking about it, or by engaging in risk-taking activities that seem to deny the possibility of fatal consequences. This works well until they are confronted with the death of someone their own age or someone whom they admire. Then teens are forced to acknowledge death’s reality and, in turn, their own mortality.

In addition, when teens are confronted with the suicide of a close peer, their keen sense of social responsibility within the peer group can increase their feelings of guilt at not having been able to prevent the death.

These are some of the reasons any death, but especially a suicide, in the school community can be so upsetting to students. It confronts them with a reality that is developmentally necessary for them to deny.

Other factors that can impact a teen’s reaction to a suicide are a personal history of emotional difficulties or previous suicide attempts. Students with emotional problems may lack the psychological resources to protect themselves from the shock of a peer’s death and might seem to overreact to the current loss. Students who have made previous suicide attempts usually find that a completed suicide reminds them uncomfortably of their own past attempt. This is especially true if the completed suicide involves a similar method. In addition, students who have had previous experience with any type of death may find themselves overwhelmed with feelings of grief from these prior losses.

A student’s relationship to the deceased can also affect his or her reaction to the death. The general rule is that the closer or more intense a relationship is, the more intense the grief over its loss.

How to Help Students Deal with Death

Here are some tips that can help students address their reactions to a death in the school community:

Elementary School and Middle School

- These students usually benefit from brief and structured group discussions, like those held in the familiar surroundings of the classroom, led by people with whom they are familiar. Even the youngest child can benefit from hearing the questions and comments of peers.
- Don't be afraid to use the words *death* and *died*. Avoid euphemistic expressions that can be confusing or even frightening.
- Avoid religious or spiritual explanations of death unless you are in a nonpublic school where that type of discussion would be appropriate.
- Classroom discussion should not focus on the circumstances of the death but rather on the fact that the deceased student will no longer be part of the class. (This reality will take time to sink in, which is partly why initial interest may focus on "what happened" rather than on the long-term consequences.) Encourage students to reflect on the ways in which they will miss their deceased peer.
- Always emphasize personal safety and prevention strategies, especially if the death was a suicide. These include sharing any concerns about one's self or a peer with a trusted adult. Point out that this applies to all types of situations. If a child is worried about a physical illness, a trusted adult should be consulted. And if a child is worried that a friend may do something to hurt himself or herself, an adult should be informed as well. Remind students about the trusted adults in the school community to whom they can turn for support.
- Following the classroom discussion, the teacher or counselor can engage children on a one-to-one basis if necessary. Listening to stories and doing activities such as drawing or painting are excellent techniques to help children express feelings for which they may lack words.
- Especially after a violent death like a suicide or homicide, younger children may act out their fears on the playground, attempting mastery through imitation of the circumstances of the death. Teachers should take such behaviors as a normal response, yet use them to engage the class in an informal discussion about problem solving and communication.

High School

- Discussions in the classroom, again with adults with whom students are familiar, can briefly address the circumstances of the death. But, as with younger students, discussions can be more productive when they focus on coping, problem solving, and help-seeking.
- Anticipate that some students may be reluctant to self-identify and may need additional supports. Copy and distribute resource lists that identify resource persons in the school as well as those in the community. If you are aware of helpful Web-based resources, include those as well.