

Child and Teen Developmental Grief Response Chart

Age	Development Stage/Task	Concept of Death	Grief Response	Signs of Distress	Possible Interventions
2 to 4	Egocentric. Believe world centers around them. Narcissistic. Lack cognitive understanding of death and related concepts	Death seems as reversible, as abandonment, not permanent. Common statements: "Did you know my Mom died? When will she be home?"	Intensive response but brief. Very present oriented. Most aware of changes in patterns of care. Asking questions repeatedly	Regression: changes in eating and sleeping patterns, bed wetting, general irritability and confusion.	Short, honest interactions, frequent repetition, comforting, reassurance, nurturing. Consistent routine.
4 to 7	Gaining sense of autonomy. Exploring world outside of self. Gaining language. Fantasy thinking and wishing. Initiative phase seeing self as initiator. Concerns of guilt.	Death still seen as reversible. Personification of death. Feeling of responsibility because of wishes and thoughts. Common statements: "It's my fault. I was mad and wished she'd die."	More verbalization. Great concern with process. How? Why? Repetitive questioning. May act as though nothing has happened. General distress and confusion.	Regression: nightmares, sleeping and eating disturbed. Violent play. Attempts to take on role of person who died.	Symbolic play using drawings and stories. Allow and encourage expression of energy and feelings through physical outlets. Talk about it.
7 to 11	Concrete thinking. Self-confidence develops. Beginning of socialization. Development of cognitive ability. Beginning of logical thinking.	Death seen as punishment. Fear of bodily harm and mutilation. This is a difficult transition period, still wanting to see death as reversible but beginning to see it as final.	Specific questions. Desire for complete detail. Concerned with how others are responding. What is the right way to respond? Starting to have ability to mourn and understand mourning.	Regression: school problems, withdrawal from friends. Acting out. Sleeping and eating disturbed. Overwhelming concern with body. Suicidal thoughts (desire to join one who died). Role confusion.	Answer questions. Encourage expression of range of feelings. Explain options and allow for choices. Be available but allow alone time. Symbolic plays. Allow for physical outlets. TALK ABOUT IT!
11 to 18	Formal operational problem solving. Abstract thinking. Integration of one's own personality	"ADULT" approach. Ability to abstract. Beginning to conceptualize death. Work at making sense of teachings.	Depression. Denial. Regression. More often willing to talk to people outside of family and peer support. Traditional mourning.	Depression. Anger. Anger towards parents. Non-compliance. Rejection of former teaching. Role confusion. Acting Out.	Encourage verbalization. Do not take control. Encourage self motivation. Listen. Be available. Do not attempt to take grief away.

