

How Children Understand Death by Age Level

A child's understanding of death changes as he or she grows. Adults should understand these developmental stages so they can respond appropriately to children's needs. As with all developmental frameworks, these feelings and concerns may be experienced by the child at different times under different circumstances. The following is offered as a guideline to understanding a child's concept of death.

Preschool

- Death is temporary, reversible, and caused magically.
- Everything in the world is alive, including inanimate objects.
- Dead people, too, are therefore alive; death is a deep sleep.
- May worry about the physical comfort and care of a dead person—Are they hungry? Cold? Lonely?
- Magical thinking assumes that people can die because of another's thought, wish, or action and can return to life just as readily.

Primary Grades

- Storybook endings. Death is temporary . . .
- A child may see death as a magical journey from which we can return.
- A child may believe the person is just sleeping or can be revived.
- If magic is strong enough, death can be conquered.
- A child may feel responsible for the death because of his or her angry thoughts, feelings, or actions.

Upper Elementary–Middle School Grades

- Children now know that everything that lives also dies.
- Dead means dead, but what does it look like?
- Students understand death is a permanent, universal condition.
- Students see the rituals and details that surround death as a curious set of conditions they may wish to explore.
- Students view death is a distant event that happens to the very old or sick.
- Students begin to develop a cognitive awareness of death as caused by illness, violence, or accidents.

- Since they understand that death is irreversible, they be fearful of physical causes of death.

Middle School–High School Grades

- Death is final and irreversible and happens to everyone, including them.
- However, death is a distant reality.
- Students begin to develop a deeper understanding of death.
- Students understand death is a natural part of life.
- Students view their own death is a distant part of the future and don't connect their actions to the possibility of dying.
- Students may have a sense of immortality and invulnerability: "It won't happen to me."
- Adolescents may glorify a dead peer.