

Understanding Death

Children at different stages of development have different understandings of death and the events near death.

Infants:

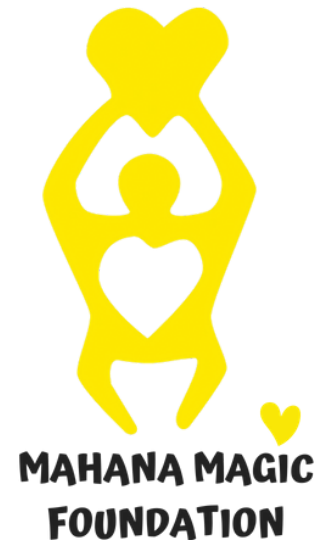
Infants do not recognize death, but feelings of loss and separation are part of developing an awareness of death. Children who have been separated from their mother may be sluggish and quiet, may not respond to a smile or a coo, may have physical symptoms (such as weight loss), and may sleep less.

Age 2-3 years:

Children at this age often confuse death with sleep and may feel anxiety as early as age 3. They may stop talking and appear to feel overall distress.

Age 3-6 years:

At this age children see death as a kind of sleep; the person is alive, but only in a limited way. The child cannot fully separate death from life. Children may think that the person is still living, even though he or she might have been buried. The child may ask questions about the deceased (for example, how does the deceased eat, go to the toilet, breathe, or play?). Young children know that death is physical, but think it is not final. The child's understanding of death may involve "magical thinking". For example, the child may think that his or her thoughts can cause another person to become sick or die. Grieving children under 5 may have trouble eating, sleeping, and controlling the bladder and bowel.



Age 6-9 years:

Children at this age are often very curious about death, and may ask questions about what happens to the body when it dies. Death is thought of as a person or spirit separate from the person who was alive, such as a skeleton, ghost, angel, or bogeyman. They may see death as final and scary but as something that happens mostly to old people (and not to themselves). Grieving children can become afraid of school, have learning problems, show antisocial or aggressive behavior, or become overly worried about their own health and complain of imaginary symptoms. Children this age may either withdraw from others or become too attached and clingy. Boys often become more aggressive and destructive (for example, acting out in school), instead of showing their sadness openly. When one parent dies, children may feel abandoned by both the deceased parent and the living parent, whose grief may make him or her unable to emotionally support the child.

Age 9 and older:

Children aged 9 and older know that death cannot be avoided and do not see it as a punishment. By the time a child is 12 years old, death is seen as final and something that happens to everyone.