

## Child and Teen Developmental Grief Responses Chart

Age	Developmental Stage/Task	Concept of Death	Grief Response	Ways to support
2 – 4	Believe the world revolves around them. No cognitive understanding. Unable to grasp abstract concepts.	Death is reversible. Common statements: “Did you know my mom died? When will she be home?”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intensive, brief response.</li> <li>• Repetitive questions.</li> <li>• Tells story to anyone.</li> <li>• Regression: changes in eating and sleeping patterns, bed wetting, irritability, temper tantrums, clinginess.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consistent routine.</li> <li>• Short, honest explanation: “Mommy died. Her body stopped working”.</li> <li>• Give simple choices.</li> <li>• Provide opportunities for play and big emotion.</li> <li>• Extra comforting, nurturing.</li> </ul>
5 – 8	Exploring world outside of self, and trying things on their own. Fantasy thinking and wishing. Concerns of guilt.	Death still seen as reversible. Feeling responsibility. Common statements: “It’s my fault. I was mad and wished she’d die.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disrupted sleep &amp; eating.</li> <li>• Repetitive questions: How? Why? Who else?</li> <li>• Short periods of strong reaction, then acting as though nothing happened.</li> <li>• Regression: nightmares, needing help with already learned tasks.</li> <li>• Behavioral changes</li> <li>• Physical complaints.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Short, honest explanation using concrete language: “Daddy’s heart stopped working”.</li> <li>• Provide opportunities for big energy and creative play.</li> <li>• Allow children to talk about experience and ask questions.</li> <li>• Extra comforting, nurturing.</li> <li>• Give choices when possible.</li> </ul>
8 – 12	Concrete thinking and beginning to understand abstract ideas. Self-confidence develops. Beginning of socialization.	Begin to understand death is permanent and think about how loss will affect them over the long-term. Feelings of guilt and regret can lead to concern that thoughts and actions made death happen.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expressing big energy can seem like acting out.</li> <li>• Concern for safety of self/others.</li> <li>• Difficulty concentrating/focusing.</li> <li>• Nightmares and intrusive thoughts.</li> <li>• Physical complaints.</li> <li>• Desire for complete detail.</li> <li>• Wide range of emotions.</li> <li>• Sensitivity to noise, light, movement and change.</li> <li>• Withdrawal from social.</li> <li>• Suicidal thoughts (desire to join one who died).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Answer questions.</li> <li>• Encourage expression of feelings: art, physical activity, play, writing.</li> <li>• Maintain routines but be flexible.</li> <li>• Give choices when possible.</li> <li>• Model expressing emotions and self-care.</li> <li>• Listen.</li> <li>• Seek professional help for concerns around self-harm or suicidal thoughts.</li> </ul>
13 – 18	Able to understand abstract concepts. See themselves as unique. Often rely on peers outside family for support.	Understand death is permanent, may have unspoken magical thoughts. May also delve into meaning of life, death and other traumatic events.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Withdrawal from family or support.</li> <li>• Increased risk taking.</li> <li>• Inability to concentrate.</li> <li>• Difficulty sleeping.</li> <li>• Lack of appetite/eating too much.</li> <li>• Worry about safety of self/others.</li> <li>• Confusion over role identity.</li> <li>• Suicidal thoughts/self-harm.</li> <li>• Sensitivity to noise, movement, light and change.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reinforce safety and security, even if concern not expressed.</li> <li>• Maintain routines but be flexible.</li> <li>• Allow for expression of feelings.</li> <li>• Answer questions honestly.</li> <li>• Provide choices when possible.</li> <li>• Model appropriate expression of grief and self-care.</li> <li>• Listen.</li> <li>• Seek professional help for concerns around self-harm or suicidal thoughts.</li> </ul>

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