

This Developmental Response Resource is from Marie Trozzi's Good Grief Program

UNDERSTANDING:

Preschoolers (ages 3-5): These youngsters see death as temporary and reversible. They believe the dead live on under changed circumstances either on a cloud in a city called Heaven or in a box under the ground connected to other boxes by tunnels. Preschoolers ask many questions, often gross and grubby, about how one lives on. No matter how well death is explained, many will persist in their beliefs about its reversibility. These children are likely to be literal and concrete in their thinking.

Latency (ages 6-8): Children in this developmental stage see death as a person or spirit that comes to yet you if you aren't fast or clever enough to escape. From their perspective, three groups of people die: the elderly the handicapped (because they can't run fast enough) and the klutzes. Klutzes are people who die that are neither elderly nor handicapped. In an effort to make themselves feel different and therefore safe, children will often find some specific way, frequently negatively, to differentiate themselves from people who die.

Preadolescents (ages 9-11): These youngsters have a more adult understanding of death, seeing it as final, universal and irreversible. They are interested in rituals and concerned how the world will change because of the death of a particular person. This age group is frequently described as having the easiest time dealing with death and dying because they tend to intellectualize as a way of coping with the experience. They can sometimes sound crass and uncaring.

Adolescents (age 12+): Adolescents work hard to make sense of their own eventual death and the death of others. Just when they are being asked to take responsibility for their own lives, they are confronted by experiences that challenge their own lives: they are confronted by experiences that challenge their belief in their own immortality. They privately worry about the consequences of their own risk-taking behaviors while publicly proclaiming their invulnerability. They are emotionally vulnerable when a death occurs and often sob or hug each other. They are concerned about what it is worth living for and what it is worth dying for. They want to understand adult rituals at the time of death, but often prefer to develop their own. Their grief at times of death tends to be expressed with peers rather than family members often causing adults to believe the adolescent is not grieving. Adolescents are embarrassed when people know their parent or brother/sister had died because they feel this makes them different than others their own age.

GRIEVING: Normal grief includes both sadness and anger. It is often easier to tolerate children's sadness than it is to provide opportunities for them to express their anger. A child's style of grieving will differ depending on the age of the child relationship to the person who died, suddenness of the death etc.. It is important to validate all of the feelings a child experiences associated with the death of a friend and to provide a psychologically safe environment for doing so.

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