

# CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH

**0-2 Years** After a death in the family it is common for a baby to become withdrawn or display outbursts of loud crying and angry tears. Although infants do not understand death, they know when things have changed and may react to a person's absence. This may show in clinginess and distress. Maintaining the child's routine and making them feel secure are the most important ways to support children of this age.

**2-5 Years** Children still do not fully understand death at this age. They don't realise that death is permanent and is something that happens to everyone at some time. They need to know the person who died cannot return and that they are not simply asleep. They worry that something they said or did may have caused the death and need reassurance to know that it is not their fault. Children should be encouraged to ask questions which should be answered openly and simply. Children often ask the same questions over and over again. Answering these questions patiently will help them and give them reassurance.

**5-8 Years** Children gradually learn that death is final and that all people will die at some time. This may make them worry that other people close to them will also die. It can help children to talk about these fears. We can't promise children that no-one will ever die in the family but we can help them to feel safe by telling them that they will always be looked after. It can help children if they are encouraged to talk about and express their feelings, no matter what the feelings are. More curious children in this age group often ask direct questions about what has happened to the body as they are trying to understand. They may blame themselves in some way for the death and can engage in 'magical thinking', filling the gaps when information has not been given to them.

**8-12 Years** They understand that death is irreversible, universal and has a cause. Grief can express itself through physical aches and pains and challenging behaviour. It is important not to place unnecessary responsibility on children of this age especially eldest children who may feel responsible for younger siblings, or boys who lose their father and take on the role of 'man of the house'. Support the child by reassuring them about changes in lifestyle (such as household income and the family home).

As the child moves into adolescence they face a time of great change. As teenagers try to bridge the gap between childhood and adulthood, they struggle with issues of identity and independence. Losing someone at this time can make life very difficult. There is a marked difference in the grieving styles of Early (12-14 years) and Late (15-18 years). For more detailed information about adolescent loss see our website

## THE IRISH CHILDHOOD BEREAVEMENT NETWORK (ICBN)

The network supports families and professionals who support bereaved children in Ireland;

- We provide information on children's grief and how it may be supported.
- We advocate on behalf of bereaved children to Government and other agencies.
- We have developed a Pyramid of Bereavement Care for Children in Ireland exploring needs and competencies.
- We have developed Standards for supporting bereaved Children & Young People.
- We have also created resources to support teachers in their classroom while teaching bereaved children.
- We organise and host national conferences, regional meetings and workshops throughout Ireland to bring professionals together.



VISIT OUR WEBSITE  
[www.childhoodbereavement.ie](http://www.childhoodbereavement.ie)



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