Concepts of Death

Take-Home Message

The death of someone close can be overwhelming for children. There are four concepts about death that are important for children to understand. Children who understand these concepts will be better prepared to cope with a loss.

Four Concepts About Death

1. Death is irreversible.
2. All life functions end completely at the time of death.
3. Everything that is alive eventually dies.
4. There are physical reasons someone dies.

The Four Concepts and Why They're Important

1. Death is irreversible.

Children often see cartoon and TV characters who "die" and come back to life. Adults may describe death as "going on a long journey." Children may view death as a temporary separation. They have no reason to begin the mourning process. They may even be angry at the person for not contacting them or returning for important occasions.

An essential first step in the mourning process is understanding and accepting that the loss is permanent.

Understanding this concept allows children to begin to mourn.

2. All life functions end completely at the time of death.

Very young children initially view all things as alive—toys, rocks, cars. Adults may add to this confusion when they use phrases such as, "The car died." As they grow older, children will understand that inanimate objects are not alive, but they may still be confused at times. A robot may seem alive, a tree may not.

Children may assume a person who has died doesn't move because there is no room in the coffin. If children are asked to draw a picture or write a note to put in the coffin, they may assume the person who died will see their work. They may believe the deceased will see how dark it is in the coffin, or hear the sound of dirt falling on the casket. Children may worry that the deceased is suffering—afraid, cold, hungry, in pain, or lonely.

Understanding this concept helps children realize the person who died is not suffering.

3. Everything that is alive eventually dies.

Children may assume they and their loved ones will never die. Some parents reassure their children that they will always be available to take care of them. They may tell their children they don't need to worry about dying. It is understandable that parents want to shield their children from death, but once a death occurs in a child's life, these messages can be troubling and confusing.

It is difficult for children to learn this concept the first time a death occurs. If they do, children may worry that all the people they care about will die and they will be left alone.

If children don't see death as inevitable, they may wonder why a particular death occurred. Often they conclude it is because of something bad they did, or something they failed to do. This can lead to guilt. They may also believe it is because of something the deceased did or didn't do. This can lead to shame.

Understanding this concept makes it less likely that children will associate death with guilt and shame.

4. There are physical reasons someone dies.

When children don't understand the true reason a person died, they are more likely to create explanations that create confusion and add to guilt or shame. Adults can help children understand the physical cause of a death by being brief and using simple language at a developmentally appropriate level.

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Understanding this concept helps minimize possible confusion and feelings of guilt and shame children may feel when a loved one dies.

What Children Can Understand

Most children understand these concepts between ages 5 and 7. Younger children can be helped to understand these concepts, especially once they have experienced a close personal loss.

While older children and adolescents usually understand the four concepts more fully than younger children, they are also likely to have questions related to these concepts when a death touches them in some way. They may wonder if they were responsible in some way or worry that others they care about will die soon. If they have not previously experienced a death, accepting the true inevitability of death can be painful and confusing.

Children Want to Engage in This Dialogue

Adults don't usually realize that from very early on in life, children develop an awareness of loss and seek to engage adults in a dialogue about this. Between six and twelve months of age, for example, infants begin to develop "object permanence"—the recognition that even when a person is not in their immediate view, the person exists elsewhere. They may become distressed at the absence of an important person.

Infants this age all over the world begin to play the game we call peekaboo in the United States. They fix their attention on someone, then experience a brief separation. This is followed by heightened awareness and concern, then relief and joy at the reunion. This may be the first dialogue about loss and death children seek with adults. The translation of peekaboo from Old English is "alive or dead."

Adults may discuss death with children as they grow older, but often choose words they feel are gentler. However, less direct terms may be confusing. For example, if children hear someone who died is in a state of eternal sleep, they may be afraid to go to sleep. Especially with younger children, it's important to use the terms dead and died.

Faith-based Beliefs

Children of any age may find comfort in a family's faith-based beliefs. However, some religious concepts may be too abstract for young children. In addition to a family's faith-based beliefs—what happens to a person's spirit after death, for example—it is important for children to understand the physical realities about what happens to the body. This includes the Four Concepts About Death.

Teachers can encourage children who ask faith-based questions about death to discuss their questions with family members.

Check Children's Understanding

When discussing a death, it's useful to check children's understanding of the Four Concepts About Death. These steps will be helpful:

1. Start by asking children what they understand about death.
2. Give them simple and developmentally appropriate explanations.
3. Ask them to explain back to you what they understand.
4. Correct any misunderstandings or misconceptions.

These steps will help make any misunderstandings clear. For example, when children are told that the body may be placed in a casket, they may decline to attend the funeral. They may assume the head will be placed somewhere else and may not want to see a loved one decapitated.

Children With Intellectual or Other Disabilities

The Four Concepts About Death, and the four steps listed above to check children's understanding, will also be useful for children with intellectual disabilities. Their understanding of the concepts will usually be on a level commensurate with their level of general cognitive functioning. Even if

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they cannot fully comprehend the concepts or communicate their understanding, they are likely to be deeply affected by a close personal loss and benefit from efforts to help them better understand.

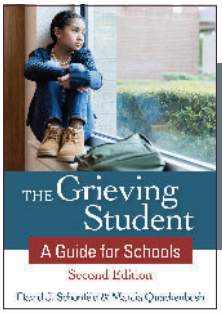
Supporting Adolescents

Society often perceives that the impact of death on adolescents is less taxing than for young children. Adolescents are expected to be more mature and better able to handle the concepts and consequences of a death. They can think more rationally and abstractly than younger children. They are capable of independent thought and action. They may be less open to offers of assistance and guidance.

Adults may believe that adolescents don't need the kind of support and outreach that younger children do at the time of a death. Adolescents may receive fewer services than parents and younger children. They may be expected to provide comfort to both parents and younger siblings, and required to take on more adult responsibilities in the family.

While adolescents may understand death better than young children, they will still have questions. Like adults facing a loss, they will question each of the Four Concepts About Death. Did they see their loved one in a crowd? Hear the person's voice? Do they feel the person is still present in some way? They may ask themselves how this event happened, and wonder if they might have done something to prevent it.

The Four Concepts About Death can offer a useful framework for discussions with adolescents. Even when they clearly understand death, they are likely to need to discuss the same issues as young children.



For more information on supporting grieving students, refer to *The Grieving Student: A Guide for Schools* by David Schonfeld and Marcia Quackenbush.