

HOW DO WE TELL THE CHILDREN? WHAT CHILDREN THINK ABOUT DEATH

There are certain ways of thinking and acting that are unique to children at various stages of development. While many of the characteristics overlap, four distinct groups and levels of development can be seen: two to six-year-olds; six to nine-year-olds; nine to twelve-year-olds; and teenagers.

TWO TO SIX YEARS

Stop for a moment and watch a pre-schooler at play. To him or her, the world is a magical place, full of people coming and going around the family, the centre of the world. It's a world in transition, a time of learning and growing and finding out how things work. Concepts like time and death are not yet fully developed in the pre-schooler's mind; he simply can't grasp them. What he can understand are the day-to-day things in life and the feeling of his family taking care of him.

Since a young child's experience and vocabulary are limited, he has to draw on what he knows. Imitating the world around him, he picks up Mommy's pocketbook or puts on Daddy's shoes, trying to see how a grown-up feels, experimenting with words he hears to see how it all fits. "I'm going to work now!", the little child asserts as he shuffles down the hall.

Young children are equally sensitive to our non-verbal attitudes. If we are reserved, fearful, paranoid, or hostile, very often our children will pick up on those feelings and act just like us. If we are open, honest, warm, and loving, they will get the message that that's the way to be.

Children in this age group generally do not think of death as final; to them, *death is reversible*. In order to understand the finality of death, a youngster has to recognize that he is a separate person from his parents – that without them he can still exist. While older children can comprehend this, most pre-schoolers cannot. They are helpless by themselves, dependent, and they know they need to be protected. A world without his parents is beyond his grasp. His mind also can't imagine the nothingness of death. So if he hears that someone dies, he figures it's a temporary thing; you die and then come back; it's like going out to the

grocery store. Just as characters on TV disappear on one show and appear on another, so will Grandpa rise from the dead. He's really dead only for a little time. He's still eating and moving around, it's just that what he happened to be doing when we last saw him, he's still doing it now.

One little fellow, Roy, age five, was on his first airplane trip when he asked his mother to open the window. "I want to give JoJo some dinner," he explained.

Roy's thinking was that the plane was flying around heaven and that his friend JoJo, who had died a few months before, was hiding behind one of the clouds, alive and well and hungry. His sister, Fredericka, just a year older, described how JoJo got up to heaven: "The angels came down and got JoJo, and like E.T. she rose up into heaven one night. There had to be a whole bunch of angels to hold her because JoJo was so big."

Magical thinking plays a big role in children's lives at this age, and of course it extends to their thoughts about death. Some young children, for example, imagine that by putting a body in water, you'll bring it back to life, like a dehydrated food. Others figure that if they wish hard enough they can bring the dead person back to life.

Sometimes they even invest themselves with magical powers. "I'll go beat up the bad man who killed Auntie." The child in his imagination fashions a set of powers that counters all the disquieting facts he's seen around him.

It's partly because of the magical world they create that youngsters get the courage to deal with the problems of life; but sometimes they go a little overboard. Consider the little girl who was playing in her grandmother's yard, bouncing the ball against the wall, over and over. In exasperation the grandmother yelled, "Stop doing that! You'll be the death of me yet!" The child thought about that for a moment, then started playing something else. A few days later Grandma died. "Boy, I've done it now!" The child thought she had killed her grandmother.

Connecting events that don't belong together is something children commonly do that many adults find hard to understand. In the example I just gave, the little girl connected the bouncing ball incident and the death of her grandmother, which filled her with guilt and a feeling of responsibility. Since most youngsters have a hard time admitting that they threw the ball that broke a window you can imagine how hard it would be to tell someone that she killed her grandmother! That's why it's important to get to her and explain what really happened to Grandma before she distorts the incident out of all proportion in her mind. Adults seldom make these kinds of connections because their reasoning powers are developed. But children who are searching for a beginning, middle, and end to a story will fill in the blanks and simply make up a message when they're missing the facts.

They also take the admonitions of adults quite literally. "You have to eat so your body will get big and strong." That's what four-year-old Tim was told as he made soup out

of his mashed potatoes one evening. The next morning his father died. Strange as it may seem, the child thought he had killed his father by not eating his potatoes. In another instance, Jimmy overheard Aunt Millie saying that Grandpa had died in his sleep. "Thank God, it was so peaceful. He just fell asleep and died." When it came time for Jimmy to go to bed that night, he wanted no part of it; he was afraid that he wouldn't wake up either.

A child hears that Grandpa got sick and died, and the next time Daddy starts to cough or the child himself gets a stomach pain, watch his reaction. "What colour shirt was Grandpa wearing when he died?" he might ask. Tell him a blue one (without explaining that it had nothing to do with Grandpa's death), then see what happens the next time you try to put his blue pullover on him.

One middle-aged friend of mine, who has more gray hairs than he would like, could not understand why his grandson clung to him so tightly. He asked the child what was the matter. The reply: "You're very old, too (the gray hair), and I don't want you to die!"

Another little boy, named Brett, overheard that his grandfather had looked awful for the past few weeks, and he filed that away. A week later the child was watching a Saturday afternoon monster movie, in which some humanoid was melting across the screen. His mother came in and said, "Oh, I can't let you watch that. That's awful-looking!" and she switched off the TV. "Aha!" said the child to himself, and his mind connected three events. Here's how the syllogism went in his mind: 1) Grandpa looked awful; he died, and Mommy wouldn't let me go to see him; 2) That humanoid looked awful, and Mommy wouldn't let me watch him on TV; 3) Grandpa must look as horrible as that monster on TV. And that's the final picture the youngster retained of the grandfather he loved so much.

For parents to help their children, they must be aware that things like this may be going on in their heads. The experience of death is probably new and strange to them, and their feelings of confusion and guilt when someone they were close to dies may be absolutely overwhelming.

SIX TO NINE YEARS

Children who are around the ages of six to nine often look on death as a *taker*, something violent that comes and gets you, like a burglar or a ghost. When they hear that someone died, these children may ask, "Who killed him?" In their minds death is personified, an external agent that catches you. It's a scary skeleton or a bogeyman to be run away from or to be handled by magic.

Although children in this age group have begun to comprehend the finality of death, very often they retain a lot of that magical thinking, overestimating the power of their

thoughts and wishes. They may accept the fact that someone has died and that it's final, but they don't accept the fact that it must happen to everyone, especially themselves.

Many children of this age are afraid that death is *contagious*, something that can be caught, like a cold. Some even think that if another child's parent dies they can catch death by playing with that child, or by playing in the house where the dead person lived.

Little phrases and chants that they hear can have a traumatic effect on them. The bedtime verse that used to be so popular – “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep” – caused many youngsters to worry about dying in their sleep. In order to get that fantasy material that is so scary to them out where we can help them deal with it, we have to get them to talk about it.

Still in a transitional stage, children aged six to nine find many words confusing. Some words have several meanings, and often the child can't differentiate between them. Take the word “soul” for example. One researcher told the story of a child, caught in a fantasy, who thought he heard his dead father speaking to him from a shoebox in the closet. In the child's mind, “soul” and the “sole” of a shoe had become all mixed up.

NINE TO TWELVE YEARS

As a child grows in the nine-to-twelve age group, he or she develops an acute sense of morality, of right and wrong behaviour. Very often children will think of death as a punishment for bad behaviour; an unkind person's death was due to his wrongdoing. Though they're making the transition to a more adult understanding of the concept of death, they will sometimes have remnants of magical thinking and the “I did it” syndrome. The child who resisted going to see his grandmother when she was sick, thinking, “Why do I have to go to see her? I'm missing my ball game. If only she wasn't around!” may be plagued with guilt when she dies. He probably wouldn't admit it to anyone, and it would take some detective work to find out that that's what he's thinking – but it's important for children to know that wishes don't kill. You might start out by saying, “Some children think that a person can die if you just think about their dying,” and see how your child responds.

At this age children will probably be interested in the biological details of what happened. Unlike younger children, they have a frame of reference now and can handle much of the information you would give an adult. Because of their schooling in science, some preteens understand more about biology and chemistry of the body than we adults do.

Because they are experimenting with ideas and theories, they may think that death is a way of getting rid of people, to make ready for new ones. Another theory you hear among children in these “middle years” is that each time there's a death, there's a birth.

Their cognitive and emotional skills are in transition, and children this age have standards and concerns that are very important to them, such as the idea that when something dies it should be buried. Preteens often handle the funeral of a pet with great ceremony and ritual.

Elaine, a twelve-year-old whose guinea pig died, seemed to express the same degree of concern for the burial of her pet as another child did for her father who had died six months earlier. Elaine was quite concerned about all the details – that it be buried in the “right place” in the yard, that the shoe box it was being buried in was clean, and so on.

Children in this age group have usually gone beyond wondering what death is. They’re more caught up in questions of relationship. “Grandpa won’t be able to go fishing with me anymore.” “Who’s going to take care of Grandma now?” “What’s going to happen to our family now that he has died?” Concerned with practical things, the child wonders if the family’s style of life will change; who will run the house, or make the money.

“Why did you put all those good clothes on my father? It’s a terrible waste of money.”

“Why is that?”

“Well, all the dirt is going to get on him when he’s buried.”

“You know, we close the casket before it’s buried.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that.”

You might have thought that a pre-adolescent would know that when a casket is put in the ground the top is closed. But you can’t assume that a child knows the same things as an adult. Also, in a stressful situation surrounding a death, children who might otherwise be very mature in their thinking may regress to an earlier stage of emotional response.

None of these stages that we are talking about is set in stone. Children move back and forth among them. Child psychiatrist Hal Fishin thinks this process continues all the way through adulthood – that we are never entirely out of one stage and into another. “I think if you scratch most of the people you know, myself included, you’ll find a residue of magical thinking. And when it comes to death, you’ll have children who, because of the better education today, seem to be very mature, who know more about death, but who respond emotionally in a very infantile way. It’s up to the parents to find out how their children think and how they communicate. And the only way they can do this is to ask them. So, if you give a little educational sermon on death, I would suggest that you ask the kids questions on what you’ve just told them to make sure they’ve got it straight.”

TEENAGERS

By the time children are in their teens, they probably understand just as well as adults what happens when a person dies. Their cognitive skills are developed, and unlike the younger child, they see death as something universal, inevitable, and irreversible. Acutely aware of themselves as people, teenagers may spend a lot of time philosophizing, criticizing, and daydreaming.

With puberty they watch their bodies change and mature, seeing the natural progression of the ageing process that makes death possible. Death is a natural enemy to this new self who's emerging. "If a person grows up to die, what's the sense of life?" they ask.

With very young children, we have to spend a lot of time thinking about the words to use to help them understand about death. With a teen this usually isn't necessary.

But *what is necessary* when they are confronted with death, is to be there to help them through their grief, to understand their emotions, and to teach them how to act in this crisis. In this time of flux when they're shifting from being dependent to being independent, and experimenting with values and ways of behaving, teenagers need some firm and gentle guidance, someone to talk to. They are probably concerned about where they fit in at this time, what they're expected to do, and how to handle the myriad emotions that are brewing inside them. They may be feeling guilt, responsibility, and anger. "If only I had bugged Grandpa to take his medicine." "If only I had gone to see him in the hospital." They probably also have a heightened awareness of their parents' vulnerability. It all of a sudden hits them that nobody lives forever...how transient life is.

In her book *Peoplemaking*, Virginia Satir points out that parents teach in the toughest school in the world, the school of making people. In order to help them grow into kind, stable adults, we need to listen to them, talk with them, to guide them. We have to treat them like people.

As we've seen, children are people with a special way of seeing the world. They have unusual ideas about death, and they are prone to certain misconceptions and difficulties with the subject at different ages. However, children can understand almost anything if it's put to them in the right way. You just have to know the right words to say.

"How Do We Tell The Children?"

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