# How children of all ages understand death

## An information sheet for adults who are supporting recently bereaved children

How much children can understand about death depends largely on their age, life experiences, and personality. But there are a few important points to remember in all cases.

- Be honest with children and encourage questions. This can be hard because you may not have all of the answers. But it's important to create an atmosphere of comfort and openness, and send the message that there's no one right or wrong way to feel.
- You might also share any spiritual beliefs you have about death.
- A child's capacity to understand death, and your approach to discussing it, will vary according to the child's age.

### Children under 2 years old

Long before they are able to talk, babies are likely to react to upset and changes in their environment brought about by the disappearance of a significant person who responded to their needs on a daily basis. Toddlers might show a basic understanding of death when they see a dead bird or insect in the garden but they do not usually understand the implications of this, such as the dead bird cannot feel anything or won't ever get up again.

### Children from 2 to 5 years old

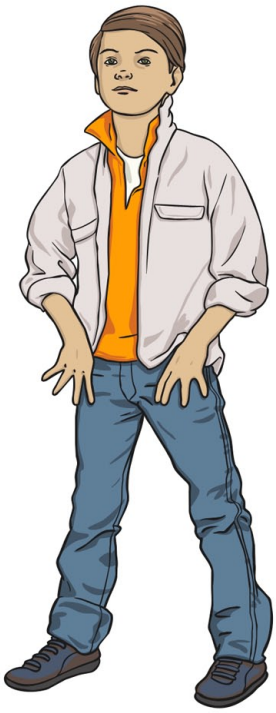
Until children are about 5 or 6 years old, their view of the world is very literal. So explain the death in basic and concrete terms, avoiding offering explanations of death such as 'gone away' or 'gone to sleep' or 'lost', as that may cause misunderstandings and confusion. Because young children think so literally, such phrases might inadvertently make them afraid to go to sleep or fearful whenever someone goes away. They often struggle with abstract concepts like 'forever' and find it difficult to grasp that death is permanent. Their limited understanding may lead to an apparent lack of reaction when told about a death.

If the loved one was ill or elderly, for example, you might explain that the person's body wasn't working anymore and the doctors couldn't fix it. If someone dies suddenly, like in an accident, you might explain what happened — that because of this very sad event, the person's body stopped working. You may have to explain that "dying" or "dead" means that their body has stopped working.

Children this young often have a hard time understanding that all people and living things eventually die, and that it is final and they won't come back. So, even after you've explained this, children may continue to ask where the loved one is or when the person is returning. As frustrating as this can be, continue to calmly reiterate that the person has died and can't come back.

Also remember that children's questions may sound much deeper than they actually are. For example, a 5-year-old who asks where someone who died is now probably isn't asking whether there's an afterlife. Rather, children might be satisfied hearing that someone who died has now been buried or that their ashes are in a particular place.

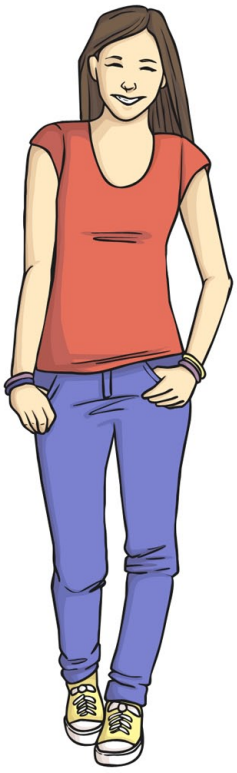
## Children of primary school age



As children get older, they begin to develop an understanding that death is permanent and start to grasp the finality of death, even if they don't understand that it will happen to every living thing one day. They may be fascinated with the physical aspects of death or the rituals surrounding it. They may misunderstand 'death' as a person who might 'come to get you' or 'catch you' if you are unlucky, such as the 'bogeyman'. They might begin to use their imagination to create a belief that their thoughts or actions caused the death and this can lead them to invent links between the two.

Most primary age children now have an awareness of death having a cause and being irreversible, but at younger ages they do not necessarily see it as inevitable, particularly in relation to themselves. As they get older, they will begin to have a more mature understanding of death, realising that it is final, permanent, universal and an unavoidable part of life. Around this age, they can become fearful as a result of their deepening realisation of the possibility of their own future death. They deal best with death when given accurate, simple, clear and honest explanations about what happened.

## Adolescents



Grief may be compounded by the struggles of adolescence, making it hard for children to ask for support, while trying to show the world that they are independent. They often have their own beliefs and strongly held views, and may challenge the beliefs and explanations offered by others. Adolescents may talk at length about the death, but seldom to those closest to them in the family.

As children mature into teens, they start to understand that every human being eventually dies, regardless of behaviour, wishes, or anything they try to do.

As a teen's understanding about death evolves, questions may naturally come up about mortality and vulnerability. For example, if a 16-year-old's friend dies in a car accident, they might be reluctant to get behind the wheel or even ride in a car for a while. The best way to respond is to empathise about how frightening and sad this accident was. It's also a good time to remind them about ways to stay safe and healthy, like never getting in a car with a driver who has been drinking and always wearing a seatbelt. Some may cope with the awareness of their own mortality through risk-taking behaviour, so reminding them to keep safe is important in helping them feel valued and secure.

Teens also tend to search more for a meaning in the death of someone close to them. A teen who asks why someone had to die probably isn't looking for literal answers, but starting to explore the idea of the meaning of life. Teens also tend to experience some guilt, particularly if one of their peers died. Whatever they are experiencing, the best thing you can do is to encourage the expression and sharing of grief.