The most important influence on how children react at a time of death is the response of parents and other important people in the child’s life.

HANDOUTS:

- Developmental Differences in Understanding and Reacting to Death
- Common Grief Reactions
- NAEYC: Children’s Books About Death

Explaining dying, death, and dead

- Death happens when the body gets so old, sick or hurt that is stops working.
- Everything that lives dies at some time. Plants die, animals die, and people die. Death is part of life.
- When a person dies, their body stops working. Their brain can’t send or receive messages, their heart stops beating, their lungs stop working, and their body cannot feel or move.
- A dead person might look like they are sleeping, but they are not sleeping and will not wake up.
- When a person dies, they cannot come back to life.

(Adapted from Judi’s House)

Things to keep in mind when talking to children about death

- Children cannot fully comprehend all that they are being told when they first hear about a death.
- The information a child is gathering by asking questions and getting answers is less important than an accepting atmosphere and supportive interactions.
- Children need to repeat their questions to adjust to the death. Keep answers simple. You do not need to offer more information than the child is asking for, but the process of repeating questions helps the death become more bearable.
- It is okay to admit that you do not know all the answers.
- Help your child label their feelings. (“It seems like you are feeling sad.” Or “I see worry/anger/confusion on your face.”). Also leave space for you or your child to have unlabeled feelings. (“It is okay to be unsure how you are feeling about all of this.”).
- It is okay to show your own emotions. Children need to know others experience big feelings. Be mindful of the difference between feeling your feelings and burdening your child with adult interpretations and emotions. Share those with an adult friend or therapist.

(Adapted from St. Anne’s Episcopal School Counseling Resources)

Additional information and support is available by contacting school psychologist, Sara Knickerbocker at sknickerbocker@msd-co.org or 303-756-9441. As always, if you or a loved one is experiencing a mental health crisis, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room.
Common Grief Reactions

Below are diverse reactions to loss that are common in some form for children and teens — and even adults — of all ages. (See table below for age-specific considerations and information.) Within the same family, some individuals might experience only a few of the reactions listed, while others might struggle with many reactions. For anyone, these types of reactions are understandable and a natural responses to a significant loss.

Feelings:
- Sadness, despair, sorrow, initial disbelief, shock, numbness, yearning, longing, missing the person
- Anger, irritability, frustration
- Anxiety, fears, worries about safety and future
- Confusion, insecurity, guilt, remorse, shame, powerlessness

Thoughts:
- Constant thoughts and memories of the death or the person who died
- Believing the person who died is still present (hearing, seeing, feeling or smelling the person; vivid dreams)
- Worries about their own health or another loved one’s health
- Confusion, disbelief about finality of death, thinking death was one’s fault
- Difficulty making decisions
- Insecurities, lowered self-esteem or self-confidence
- Impaired memory and concentration

Body Reactions:
- Frequent illness or physical complaints (stomachaches, headaches, increased heart rate, tense or sore muscles, unexplained body aches and pains)
- Loss of energy, fatigue or feeling too keyed up or on edge, difficulty relaxing or feeling calm and regulated

Behaviors:
- Less participation or interest in normal activities and/or isolation or withdrawal from others
- Inability to sleep or be alone, clinging to caregivers
- Acting younger than age or not engaging in normal self-care
- Angry, irritable or aggressive behaviors or conflicts with others
- Impulsivity and reactivity, unpredictable behaviors or hyperactivity or difficulty staying still
- Changes in sleeping patterns and appetite (eating or sleeping too much or too little)
- Performing poorly in school or work due to lack of initiative or difficulty concentrating, or anxious overachieving or perfectionism

Concerning Grief Reactions:

For most children and adults, there will be a gradual decrease in the intensity of grief reactions over the first six months to a year after the death. If any of the symptoms above are not improving at that point, or if they are interfering with normal functioning or development, it might mean that more intensive support is needed to prevent long-term problems.
Additionally, if any of the following are present, professional support should be sought:

- Severe depression (e.g., hopelessness, lack of interest in normal activities)
- Self-harm or suicidal thoughts or actions
- Reckless or illegal behaviors; dangerous aggression, fighting or bullying
- Extreme feelings of guilt or desire to seek revenge against person responsible for death
- Giving up on or inability to function at school or work, truancy
- Severe withdrawal or giving up on relationships
- Severe fears or anxiety that get in the way of normal functioning
- Substance or alcohol abuse
- Prolonged eating or sleeping problems affecting health or development
- Prolonged posttraumatic stress symptoms related to the death:
  - Increased arousal (e.g., feeling keyed up, jumpy, irritable or on edge)
  - Intrusive thoughts, images or nightmares about the death
  - Avoidance of reminders of the death (e.g., numbing, withdrawal)
  - Difficulty engaging in a healthy grieving process (e.g., sharing memories, maintaining a positive emotional connection, meaning making) because reminders of the death or the person who died trigger the above trauma reactions (this is sometimes referred to as “traumatic grief”)

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# Developmental Differences in Understanding and Reacting to Death

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Understanding of Death</th>
<th>Reactions to Death</th>
<th>Ways to Help</th>
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</table>
| **Infant to 2 years old** | • Do not understand nature or permanence of death — expect person to return  
• Experience death as separation — their special person is gone and their world is different | • Can seem unaffected  
• Searching for person who died  
• Pushing away caregivers or clinging to strangers  
• General distress, trouble sleeping or eating  
• Increased crying or difficulty self-soothing or being comforted  
• Restlessness, irritability, tantrums  
• Clinginess, separation anxiety | • Avoid confusing terms for death like “resting,” “sleeping” or “went away” that might lead to fears of sleep or separation  
• Gently help toddler understand person cannot return and that their body no longer works |
| **3 to 5 years old** | • Typically have a limited and concrete understanding of death  
• May believe person can still breathe and be hungry or cold when buried  
• Believe wishes come true (“magical thinking”)  
• Often believe person could come back to life  
• May believe death was a punishment or their fault | • May seem fine at times, and have difficulty self-soothing or being comforted at other times  
• Pushing away caregivers or clinging to strangers  
• Frequent questions about death  
• Confusion and increased fears or worries  
• Trouble sleeping or nightmares  
• Physical complaints, stomachaches, trouble eating  
• Restlessness, irritability, tantrums  
• Clinginess, separation fears  
• Worries about self or others dying  
• Acting younger than normal | • Use simple, honest language to explain death (causes of death, body stops working, cannot come back, etc.); repeat as often as child requests  
• Model and explain expressions of grief  
• Avoid confusing terms like “rest in peace” or “went away” that might lead to fears of sleep or separation  
• Provide opportunities to express their grief through play and art |
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<th>Understanding of Death</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>6 to 9 years old</strong></td>
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| - Depending on life experiences and education, might fully understanding what death means and that it is permanent and person cannot return (usually by age 7)  
- Often worry their own thoughts or actions caused the death  
- May believe death is like a person or ghost who comes to get you | - Initial denial or disbelief  
- Many questions, confusions, and fears about death  
- General distress often comes out as anger, irritability or fighting  
- Physical aches and pains  
- Trouble with school work or perfectionism  
- Attempts to conform with peers may look like “nothing is wrong”  
- Insecurities, anxiety | - Offer accurate information when child expresses confusion about death  
- Model and invite expression of feelings and thoughts  
- Provide physical outlets (sports, play) |
| **10 to 12 years old** |                    |              |
| - Fully understand what “dead” means and that death is universal (everyone dies) and irreversible (they cannot come back to life) | - Initial shock or denial  
- Anxiety, fears, anger, irritability  
- Aggression to avoid feeling helplessness  
- Distrust or fear of being abandoned  
- May seem self-centered or callous  
- Curiosity or fascination with death  
- Attempts to conform with peers; i.e. “nothing is wrong”— don’t want to be “different”  
- Insecurities; feelings of shame or embarrassment  
- Feeling guilty or remorseful for past actions with deceased | - Without pressuring youth to talk, make space to listen and answer questions honestly  
- Model and invite expression of feelings and thoughts  
- Provide reassurance of safety and future security, and offer physical proximity and comfort  
- Provide physical outlets (sports, running, play)  
- May be more likely to talk with peers and people outside of family; peer support groups can be helpful |
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<tr>
<td>13 years old or older</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Have a full adult understanding of death</td>
<td>• Feeling guilty or remorseful for past actions with deceased</td>
<td>• Without pressuring youth to talk, make space to listen and answer questions honestly</td>
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<tr>
<td>• May have ability to think abstractly and process spiritual issues and meaning in life</td>
<td>• Feelings of shame or embarrassment</td>
<td>• Model and invite expression of feelings and thoughts</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Sadness, tearfulness, depression</td>
<td>• Avoid putting adult responsibilities or pressure on teens</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Anger (at self, deceased, parents/caregivers, God, etc.)</td>
<td>• May be more likely to talk with peers and people outside of family; peer support groups can be helpful</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Irritability, frustration</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Insecurities</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Non-compliance, acting out, risky behaviors</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Trouble sleeping or oversleeping, fatigue</td>
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References: Brief Information on Childhood Traumatic Grief (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, www.nctsn.org), Dougy Center Grief Resources
(www.dougy.org), Grief in Childhood (Pearlman, Schwalbe, & Cloitre, 2010), Helping Bereaved Children (Webb, 2010)

Developmental Differences in Understanding and Reacting to Death, 3
Children's Books about Death


A favorite children's author tells the simple story of a group of children who find a dead bird and bury it in the woods. The children visit the bird's grave and decorate it with flowers daily, until eventually, they forget.


Readers journey with Everett Anderson, a young boy, as he experiences the five stages of grief following the death of his father. Rhyming text and charcoal drawings illustrate Everett's emotions and his mother's support.

**The Fall of Freddie the Leaf: A Story of Life for All Ages**, by Leo Buscaglia. 1982. Slack.

Freddie the leaf learns about life and death as he, his friend Daniel, and their fellow leaves change with the passing seasons and finally fall to the ground in the winter snow.


First-grader Jim has been having a hard time since his dog Muffins died. At school, he becomes angry when his classmates don’t seem to understand how he feels. Can his good friend Paul help him to feel better?


Using examples of humans, trees, and sea creatures, this book explains that all living things have a lifetime with a beginning, an ending, and living in between. This simply-worded book is a good resource for explaining the life cycle to young children.


Emilio Parga, founder of The Solace Tree, a child and adolescent center for grief and loss, created this memory book to give grieving children an opportunity to express themselves.

First published in 1973 and later expanded and updated, this autobiographical picture book describes dePaola’s relationships with his grandmother and great-grandmother and how he deals with their deaths.


In this beautifully illustrated book, Hanson presents a reassuring, universal view of heaven, or “the next place,” while avoiding specific religious messages. The book is best suited for children whose families believe in life after death and who are curious about what happens after someone dies.


A child experiencing the loss of a loved one is the subject of these three gentle stories. While each presents a different scenario (death by illness, accident, or old age), all of the stories address children’s sad feelings and present different coping strategies.


When his cat Barney dies, a boy tries to think of 10 good things to say about his pet at the funeral. But he is only able to think of nine good things, until a conversation with his father helps him to discover the tenth.


This book offers a straightforward introduction to death and dying for young children. Bright illustrations accompany honest answers to questions children may have about death, including “Why does someone die?” and “What does dead mean?”


At her great-aunt’s memorial service, a young girl is overwhelmed by the formal setting and emotions of relatives. But she is able to find comfort in holding and being held by her father.