



Newborn to Age 1

Developmental Needs of Infants (Newborn-1 Year Old):

- Infants have basic physical, emotional, social and nutritional needs which should be met for normal development. These needs include, but are not limited to:
 - Having regular feeding and sleeping patterns
 - Being kept warm and dry
 - Having the five senses stimulated
 - Being held and cuddled
 - Forming an attachment to caretakers
- Infants become accustomed to a routine schedule and a consistent caretaker in the first few months of life. All of these things and more may become disrupted in the event of a death in the family.
- Regular caretakers may become temporarily unavailable on a consistent basis or for an extended period of time, feeding and sleeping schedules may be altered, and the child may be put into a new and unfamiliar environment.
- Stressors may result in an infant displaying a tendency to protest or seek despair; both are characterized by the following behaviors:

Protest

Crying
Screaming
Searching for parent with eyes
Clinging to parents
Avoiding and rejecting contact with strangers

Despair

Inactive
Withdrawn
Depressed
Disinterested in environment
Passive

Infant Understanding of Death:

- Infants do not comprehend death.
- Infants may be aware of the constant buzz of activity in the house and environment.
- Infants may be aware of Mom and Dad looking sad and teary-eyed.
- Infants may be aware that someone in the home/family is missing.

Some Things to Consider When Caring For an Infant under Stress:

- Try to maintain daily routines and caregivers, but allow for flexibility.
- Stay physically close to the child to help them feel safe and loved.
- Choose familiar and supportive caregivers.
- Provide consistent discipline.
- What affects the child most is the reactions of those around them.



Toddlers

Developmental Needs of a Toddler (1 Year Old-3 Years Old):

- Toddlers, ages 1 to 3 years, continue to have many of the same basic care giving needs as infants. These needs include, but are not limited to:
 - Having regular feeding and sleeping patterns
 - Being kept warm and dry
 - Having the five senses stimulated
 - Being held and cuddled
 - Forming an attachment to caretakers.
- Toddlers are now becoming more independent than they once were. They are starting to take part in some self-care activities and beginning to have control over more bodily functions.
- Stressors may result in the toddler displaying a tendency to protest or seek despair; both are characterized by the following behaviors:

Protest

Crying
Screaming
Searching for parent with eyes
Clinging to parents
Avoiding and rejecting contact with strangers
Physical fighting (kick, hit, bite)
Verbal attack on others

Despair

Inactive
Withdrawn
Depressed
Disinterested in environment
Passive
Uncommunicative
Loss of newly learned skills

Other Grief Responses Typical of Toddler:

- Child regresses in toilet training or feeding (i.e. wanting a pacifier/bottle)
- Sleep disturbances
- Some children may seem totally unaffected
- A slight skin rash may develop



Toddler Understanding of Death:

- Toddlers have a limited understanding of death.
- Toddlers do desire to know about death and wish to discover appropriate ways to grieve.
- Toddlers don't fully understand the finality and consequence of death (they have difficulty grasping what "forever" might mean).
- Toddlers may easily confuse death with sleeping or being away.
- Toddlers may also believe death is a consequence or punishment for some wrongdoing or "being bad."
- Toddlers may have a misconception that death is reversible, the person may come back, or that the deceased is still performing life functions, such as eating, but it's simply being done in a different place (i.e. underground).

Some Things to Consider When Caring for a Toddler under Stress:

- Try to maintain daily routines and caregivers, but allow for flexibility.
- Stay physically close to the child to help them feel safe and loved.
- Choose familiar and supportive caregivers.
- Provide consistent discipline.
- The child is most affected by the reactions of those around them.
- Use the "D" words: dying, death, dead.
- Avoid euphemisms like "lost," "passed away," or "gone to sleep," which may confuse young children.
- Explain in physiological terms (i.e. person who is dead cannot eat or drink, or feel feelings like being cold after burial in the ground).
- Expect repeated questioning and testing to confirm information.



Ages 3 to 5 (Preschool)

Normal Development of Preschoolers (3 Years Old-5 Years Old):

- Between the ages of 3 to 5, children enjoy actively exploring, helping around the house and begin to cooperatively play with peers.
- Preschoolers take pride in doing things on their own, such as feeding and dressing themselves.
- Newly acquired motor skills are applied and hand-eye coordination improves. This can be seen in children's ability to hop, ride a tricycle, play catch, use utensils, button clothing and color within lines.
- A greater awareness of one's body is also achieved. Preschool children can name most of their body parts, identify themselves as a boy or a girl, and begin to segregate themselves more often according to their sex, such as in play groups.
- Children become much more verbal during this period, with their vocabulary nearly doubling between ages 3 to 4.
- Stressors may result in the child displaying a tendency to protest or seek despair; both are characterized by the following behaviors:

Protest

Crying and screaming
Clinging to parents
Avoiding contact with strangers
Verbal attacks on others
Physical fighting (kicking, biting, hitting)

Despair

Inactive and withdrawn
Loss of newly learned skills
Disinterested in environment
Uncommunicative and passive
Depressed

Other Grief Responses Typical of Preschoolers:

- Becomes concerned about his or her own well-being
- Feelings of guilt and confusion
- Using imaginative play to cope (i.e. reenacting funeral)
- Irritability and/or restlessness
- May displace feelings on others
- Regression in toilet training or feeding (i.e. wanting a pacifier/thumb sucking)
- Trouble concentrating at school and daydreaming
- Child may seem completely unaffected, although they often are



Preschooler Understanding of Death:

- Children between the ages of 3 and 5 see death as temporary and reversible; the child may continually ask if the person will return.
- Preschool children are very often confused about the details of death, since they think in such literal and concrete terms. They will ask questions, such as “Can she breathe in the box under the ground?”
- Preschool children have great difficulty integrating abstract philosophical and religious concepts into their understanding of death (i.e. “How can he be underground and also be in Heaven?”).

Some Things to Consider When Caring for a Preschooler under Stress:

- Try to maintain daily routines and caregivers.
- Children this age have the ability to process much more information than they articulate.
- Reinforce that when people are sad, they cry; crying is natural.
- Offer concrete, simple and accurate information.
- Preschoolers take literal meaning to words and explanations – avoid using euphemisms like “lost,” “passed away,” or “gone to sleep.”
- Expect misbehavior as the child struggles with confusing feelings and issues.
- Explain cause of death factually.
- Be consistent and persistent.
- Reinforce that the child is not responsible for the death.



School Age

Normal Development of School Aged Children (6 Years Old-12 Years Old):

- Child begins to understand cause/effect relationships and have logical thought processes.
- The child has developed a strong sense of who they are and a perceived sense of self-esteem. Acceptance becomes important.
- At this age, children are becoming aware of personal morals and family/societal values.
- The child can begin to see things from another person's point of view, but overall, they are still very self-centered.
- Children view things as black and white, right or wrong, wonderful or terrible, with very little middle ground.
- Friends become increasingly important.
- They tend to think that they do not need any adult care or supervision. Yet, when they are left to care for themselves, they are lonely, unhappy and sometimes frightened.
- They may belittle or defy adult authority.
- Outbursts of anger are less frequent.

Typical Grief Responses of School Aged Children:

- May seem outwardly uncaring, inwardly upset
- Use denial to cope
- May attempt to "parent" their parent
- Act out in school or home
- May play death games
- Display an increase in neediness, aggression or excessively good behavior
- Nightmares
- Withdraw from others and try to hide their feelings
- Could be overly-emotional and difficult to console; may have difficulties concentrating, especially in school



School Aged Child Understanding of Death:

- View death in a personified and externalized form (e.g. Grim Reaper, skeletons, ghosts, etc.)
- Child thinks that death happens to others. Because of their fear of death, they often protect themselves with the defense that death only occurs to other people.
- The child may be fearful that other important people will die.
- Understanding death is inevitable, happens to everyone and is final.
- Child has personal fear of death.
- Although children at this age may have a more adult understanding of the concept of death, they may still have remnants of the “I made it happen” syndrome.
- Child realizes that things around them change because of death.

Some Things to Consider When Caring for a School Aged Child Under Stress:

- Let your child know that it’s alright to show emotions by showing your own. Reassure them that some kids cry and others don’t and that we all deal differently with the death of someone close to us.
- Explore support group/peer-to-peer connections.
- Incorporate children into rituals not just at time of death, but at important anniversaries (e.g., taking flowers to the cemetery; creating a special ornament for the Christmas tree, which is always hung first; having birthday dinners and memory nights).
- Reassure the child that you will continue to be there for them.
- Increase physical activity while role-modeling stress-reducing behaviors.
- Work on identifying more sophisticated feelings and encourage creative outlets for feelings (i.e. drawing, painting, clay, blank books).
- Inform teachers and coaches of the family situation.
- Expect a more global view (i.e. death happens everywhere).
- Encourage the child to answer their own questions, but clear up any misconceptions they may have.
- Answer all questions with age-appropriate explanations and honesty.
- Provide details as needed, especially to explain cause of death in physiological context. Their understanding is increasing, and children this age can probably handle most of the information given to an adult.
- Probe for thoughts and feelings, but recognize cues that suggest the child doesn’t want to talk – remember, each person (and child) grieves differently.
- Allow for spiritual development.
- Address questions about an afterlife carefully, perhaps by stating, “We don’t really know, but we believe that...”



Adolescents

Normal Development of Adolescents (12 Years Old and up):

- Adolescents, usually ages 12 to 18, have the ability to think and process information abstractly.
- Future goals become clearer for the teenager.
- There is an increased need for independence and privacy.
- Socialization and peer groups are a priority, sometimes appearing to replace the parental bond. (Parents now serve more of a “secure base” function).
- Children this age have indestructible attitudes and egocentric thoughts and behaviors, which may induce more risk-taking types of behaviors and feelings of being unique or the center of attention.
- Teens gain the realization that parents are not perfect; identification of their faults.

Typical Grief Responses of Adolescents:

- Increased reliance on peers instead of family
- Moodiness and irritability; anger or guilt
- May act impulsively
- May display over-exaggerated outpouring of emotions
- May experience chronic depression, restlessness, difficulties eating and concentrating
- May act like they don't want to talk about death
- May become fascinated and preoccupied by death

Adolescent Understanding of Death:

- Adolescents have an adult concept of death, but their ability to deal with loss is based on experience and developmental factors.
- Cognitively, teens are fully capable of appreciating death as final and inevitable. However, they have the most difficult time emotionally of any of the age groups.
- Death at this age provokes enormous anxiety as it brings into awareness the fragility of life and the personal awareness of one's own inevitable death.
- Many adolescents are developing a strong philosophical view and may question the existence of an afterlife.



Some Things to Consider When Caring for an Adolescent under Stress:

- Provide honest and accurate information with detail.
- Allow for informed participation.
- Encourage peer support.
- Make sure to make them a part of family discussions and decisions (if they want to).
- Suggest individualized and group expressions of grief (e.g., school memorials).
- Recommend creative outlets (e.g., writing, journaling, art, music).
- Adolescents don't like anything that makes them feel different from their peers. Losses may make teens feel more child-like and dependent. On the other hand, teenagers may feel their situation requires them to step into an adult role in response to the loss.
- Treat the teen as an adult – with information, respect and responsibility – but also allow them to continue to be a kid.
- Role model adult behaviors.
- Allow the adolescent to make informed choices.
- Some teens may not be sure how to handle their own emotions [public and private] and many adolescents seek adult guidance (grief process, coping skills) and need someone to listen and to talk with as they may feel guilt, anger and even some responsibility for the death that occurred.