# DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF GRIEF AND AGE APPROPRIATE RESPONSES

For more information, call the Healing Patch at 1-800-445-6262

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<tr>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>CONCEPT OF DEATH</th>
<th>EMOTIONS</th>
<th>POSSIBLE BEHAVIORS</th>
<th>WHAT MIGHT HELP</th>
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</table>
| **BIRTH - 2 YRS.** | No understanding of death  
Child does not have words to describe feelings  
Notices changes in routine and family emotions | Longing  
Fearing of abandonment  
Anxiety  
Misses contact, sounds, smell, and sight of loved one  
May be more “hyper” | More crying  
Thumb or finger sucking  
Sucking, biting  
Rocking  
Throwing  
May cling to adult (doesn’t want parent to leave) | Keep to a schedule as much as possible  
Meet immediate physical needs  
Provide extra physical contact such as cuddling and hugging  
Talk to the infant as you hold him/her  
Be gentle and patient |
| **3 - 5 YRS.** | Does not understand the permanence of death (to be dead is to be “sleeping” or “away”)  
May wonder what deceased is doing  
Magical thinking and fantasies  
Can understand that biological processes have stopped, but sees this as temporary and reversible  
May wonder what will happen if other parent dies (or other family members) | Fear  
Sadness  
Insecurity  
Confusion  
Anger  
Worried  
Guilty | Regressive behaviors  
May have increased play  
Withdrawn  
Increased interest in death and “dead things”  
Crying  
Fighting  
Physical Complaints | Allow child to regress  
Give extra physical contact such as hugging  
Encourage child to play and have fun  
Allow safe ways to express feelings  
Explain what death is by using words like “dead” and “died”  
Be sure the child knows that he/she did not cause death  
Maintain structure and routine  
Answer repetitive questions  
Allow the child to cry  
Include child in family rituals and mourning |
| **6 - 9 YRS.** | Understands that death is “final”  
May still think that their thoughts or actions may have caused their death  
May see death as “punishment”  
Forming spiritual concepts | Sad  
Anger  
Lonely  
Withdrawn  
Worried  
Anxious  
Irritable  
Confusion | Regressive behaviors  
Specific questions - looking for details  
May act as if the death never happened  
Hides feelings  
Withdrawn  
Nightmares/sleep disturbances | Answer questions truthfully - be honest  
Allow some regression  
Provide physical contact  
Provide “special” times together  
Be sure he/she knows that nothing they did caused the death  
Allow expression of feelings through verbal and physical outlets  
Encourage drawing, painting, art, music, dance, sports, etc. |
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<td>6 - 9 YRS.</td>
<td>Thinks about life’s milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.)</td>
<td>Fear, Guilt</td>
<td>Difficulty concentrating, Declining or improving grades, Protective of surviving loved ones</td>
<td>Let the child choose how to be involved in the death and mourning, Find peer support for the child, Work with the school guidance counselor, teacher</td>
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<td>9 - 12 YRS.</td>
<td>Understands the finality of death: Denial, May think that their thoughts or actions caused the death, Thinks about life’s milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.), Formulating spiritual concepts</td>
<td>May feel “different”, Shock, Sad, Anger, Confused, Lonely, Vulnerable, Guilty, Isolated, Abandoned, Anxious</td>
<td>Fluctuating moods, Hides feelings, Acts like death never happened, Aggressive – acting out, Withdrawn, Sleep disturbances and/or nightmares, Concentration difficulties, Changes in grades</td>
<td>Allow regressive behavior, Expect and accept mood swings, Encourage expression of feelings through art, writing, sports, etc., Find peer support groups, Be available to listen and talk, Answer questions truthfully - be honest, Offer physical contact, Give choices about involvement in death and mourning</td>
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<td>12 YRS. &amp; OLDER</td>
<td>Understands finality of death: Denial, Thinks about life milestones without deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.), High death awareness (death may happen again), May sense own impending death, Needs to be “in control” of feelings (“If I show my own feelings, I will be weak”), Internal conflict about dependence and desiring dependence, May utilize spiritual concepts to cope</td>
<td>Highly self-conscious about being “different”, Shock, Sadness, Anger, Confused, Lonely, Fear, Worried, Guilty, Isolated, Abandoned, Anxious</td>
<td>Mood swings, Hides feelings, Acts like death never happened, Aggressive acting out behavior, Withdraws, Sleep disturbances and/or nightmares, Concentration difficulties, Changes in peer groups, Fighting, arguing, screaming, Changes in eating patterns</td>
<td>Allow regression, Expect and accept mood swings, Encourage expression of feelings unless there is a risk of harm, Encourage teen to talk with teacher or school counselor, Be available to listen, Create rituals of memory, Join peer support group, Share your grief</td>
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**HEALING PATCH**
A Children’s Grief Program

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i. Children Grieve, Too: Helping Children Cope With Grief. By Joy Johnson and Dr. Marvin Johnson
ii. Children’s Grief Education Association. www.childgrief.org Mary M. Lyles, MSW, LCSW