

A Child's Concept of Death (University of Rochester Medical Center)

Every child has his or her own concept of death. Past experiences with death, as well as age, emotional development, and surroundings are what most influence a child's idea of death. Cartoons, movies, TV, video games, and even books are filled with images of death. The child may have experienced death of a family member, friend, or pet in the past.

An adult's feelings and fear about death are often transferred to his or her children. Treating death as a part of life is hard. But it may help ease some of the fear and confusion linked with it.

Children may be more or less mature in their thinking and processing information than others at a similar age. The following are children's ideas of death, according to common developmental ages.

Baby

Babies have no concept of death. Babies do react to separation from a parent, painful procedures, and any change in their routine. A baby who is terminally ill will need as much physical and emotional care as any age group. Keeping a consistent routine is important for a baby and their caregivers. Because babies can't talk about their needs, fear is often expressed by crying.

Toddler

For the toddler, death has very little meaning. They may feel anxious and afraid because those around them are sad, depressed, scared, or angry. Toddlers may not understand the terms "death" or "forever" or "permanent." Even with past experiences with death, the child may not understand the relationship between life and death. To them, death is not a permanent condition

Preschool

Preschool-aged children may start to understand that adults fear death. This age group may view death as temporary or reversible, as in cartoons. Death is often explained to this age group as "went to heaven." Most children in this age group don't understand that death is permanent, that everyone and every living thing will eventually die, and that dead things don't eat, sleep, or breathe. Death should not be explained as "sleep."

Their experience with death is influenced by those around them. They may ask questions about "why?" and "how?" death happens. The preschool child

may feel that their thoughts or actions have caused the death and sadness of those around. They may have feelings of guilt and shame.

When children in this age group become seriously ill, they may think it's punishment for something they did or thought about. They don't understand how their parents could not have protected them from this illness.

This idea may make preschool-age siblings of a dying child feel as if they are the cause of the illness and death. Young siblings of dying children need reassurance and comforting during this time period, as well.

School-age

School-aged children have a more realistic understanding of death. Although death may be personified as an angel, skeleton, or ghost, this age group is starting to view death as permanent. They know that everyone dies. They may be very curious about the physical process of death and what happens after a person dies. They may fear their own death because of uncertainty of what happens to them after they die. Fear of the unknown, loss of control, and separation from family and friends can be the school-aged child's main sources of anxiety and fear related to death.

Teen

As with people of all ages, past experiences and emotional development greatly influence a teen's concept of death. Most teens understand that death is permanent, and that everyone dies. They may or may not have experienced the death of a family member, friend, or pet.

Teens, like adults, may want to have their religious or cultural rituals observed.

Most teens are starting to establish their identity, independence, and relation to peers. A main theme in teens is feeling immortal or being exempt from death. Their realization of their own death threatens all of these objectives. Denial and defiant attitudes may suddenly change the personality of a teen facing death. Teens may feel as if they no longer belong or fit in with their peers. They may also feel as if they are unable to communicate with their parents.

Self-image is also important to teens. A terminal illness or the effects of treatment may cause many physical changes that they must endure. Teens may feel alone in their struggle, and scared, and angry.

It's important for parents to realize that children of all ages respond to death in unique ways. Children need support and, in particular, someone who will listen to their thoughts, and reassure them to ease their fears.