



Support for Bereavement

Children's understanding of death

The following is a guide to how children may understand death, however this can be dependent upon the child's maturational and conceptual levels, and his/her previous experiences.

□ **3 – 5 years**

- Children do not yet accept death as a permanent process
- Death is seen as an ending
- They fear separation and abandonment more than death
- Children may feel angry or sad that someone is not coming home

They will often ask questions such as 'when will grandma come back?'

□ **5-7 years**

- Children perceive death as something which happens to 'objects' or pets
- Death is a vague concept often equated with sleep; for most at this age it is still non-permanent, though there is the beginnings of a concrete understanding of death
- Children generally have little fear of dying themselves

□ **7-9 years**

- Death is understood as permanent
- Children show some understanding of the emotional response of sadness associated with funerals and mourning ceremonies
- There is often fear about their own mortality and of those whom they love
- Children easily identify dead/alive objects
- There is often some confusion concerning literal/metaphorical use of the word 'dead'

□ 9-13 years

- Death is understood as the inevitable end to 'earthly' life
- Abstract/symbolic concepts of death are formed
- Young people pose a deluge of questions concerning loss and death
- Own opinions are formed concerning what happens at death and beyond

□ 13+ years

- Opinions are formed concerning ethical issues of life and death
- An understanding of death as part of a philosophical framework within concepts of time/space and cause/effect
- Concept that death is one of the principles which govern the universe

Class Teachers will follow an aide memoire when talking to children in their class about bereavement:

- They will keep to the facts and use clear language eg: dead not passed away. They will avoid metaphors or idioms when communicating to children.
- They will seek to normalise all feelings and responses emphasising that there is no right or wrong way to respond to this news.
- They will allow time for questions and will answer them factually in an age appropriate manner.
- They will, where appropriate, model their own responses to such information eg: 'This is how I felt when I found out...'
- They will keep lines of dialogue and communication open and remind children that they can talk to a trusted adult if they feel sad, confused or worried.

