

## Information Sheet 2: Children's Understanding of Death

Children's understanding	Implications
<p><b>Birth to 2 years:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do not understand finality of death</li> <li>can miss the presence of primary caregiver</li> <li>Will react to loss by crying and altering sleeping and eating habits</li> <li>Can become detached</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Children do not understand the permanence of separation</li> <li>Children tend to think in literal terms so the type of language used should be clear not euphemistic</li> <li>Children may build up fantasies far worse than the reality if they are not given facts from the adults who are trying to protect them</li> <li>It is not uncommon for children to ask about the physical well-being of the dead person and they may seem to take things in their stride</li> </ul>
<p><b>2 – 5 years:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Believe death is reversible</li> <li>Do not always have vocabulary to express grief</li> <li>Feelings may be acted out in behaviour and play</li> <li>May have an interest in dead things</li> <li>May ask some questions over and over again</li> <li>React in light of their own experiences of death</li> </ul>	
<p><b>5 - 7 years:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Able to appreciate that death unavoidable and will happen to everyone except them</li> <li>Develop concrete understanding of the cause of death</li> <li>May assume the dead person still sees or hears them</li> <li>Can show empathy to a friend</li> <li>Become occupied with sense of (in)justice</li> <li>May develop an unwillingness to express their feelings (boys)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some see death as a form of punishment and there may still be signs of magical thinking</li> <li>May feel responsible for the death, believing their destructive fantasies have come true eg wishing someone was dead</li> <li>Need to be told 'it wasn't your fault'</li> <li>Often need permission to grieve</li> </ul>
<p><b>8 – 10 years:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Begin to understand the finality of death</li> <li>Believe death only happens to others</li> <li>Death is personified as ghosts or monsters</li> <li>May engage in magical thinking</li> <li>Have strange feelings of loss</li> <li>May lack vocabulary to express feelings</li> </ul>	
<p><b>10 – 12 years:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understand the finality of death</li> <li>Curious about physical aspects of death</li> <li>Have vocabulary to express feelings but may choose not to</li> <li>May identify with deceased by imitating mannerisms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Need encouragement to express feelings</li> <li>May have short attention span</li> <li>May appear to be coping well when they're not</li> <li>May be thrust into the role of comforter</li> <li>May participate in dangerous activities eg drugs, alcohol</li> <li>Significant losses may cause regression to a previous stage of development</li> </ul>
<p><b>13 – 18 years:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adult understanding of death</li> <li>Can express feelings but may choose not to</li> <li>Philosophise about meaning of life/death</li> <li>Search for the meaning of life/death</li> <li>Death affects whole life – school, home, relationships</li> </ul>	

The impact of grief on vulnerable children such as those with difficult life experiences, complex medical needs, developmental delay, poor cognitive understanding, limited emotional development and children with particular difficulties, such as those on the autism spectrum, may respond in a way that would be expected for a younger child.