

## DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF UNDERSTANDING DEATH

*This is a general guideline in reference to the differences between ages and stages of how children understand death. Any child may move earlier into a stage or be "frozen" in an earlier stage.*

### **UNDER 3 (preverbal)**

- no language to attach to thoughts/experience -- greatest need is for immediate bonding to new support.

### **AGES 3 - 6 (magical thinking)**

- may believe s/he caused the death by magic.
- associate death w/ concurrent events/places. (G'ma died in hospital, so everyone who goes into the hospital will die there.)
- experience grief in heavy but brief spurts.
- denies death as final process (Mom will come back for my birthday).
- often forgets person has died.
- fears loss and abandonment by remaining parent.
- sees death as change in state or gradual process (a leaf may be "more dead" than a toaster).
- usually have few fears about pain/distress for the deceased.
- may not be open to reason or fact about cause of death -- at this age they often "determine" facts for themselves.
- see death as caused by external forces (retaliation, strife).

### **AGES 6 - 9 (concrete reasoning)**

- tend to personify death (death dropper, angel of death).
- superstitious, lots of ghost stories (chants, oaths).
- associate death w/ non-movement (the dead can't talk, move, walk).
- begin to explore concepts of death relative to family ("Some day my mom will die.")
- may experience sadness in anticipation of deaths which are not "rationally" imminent.
- believe it will happen to others, not themselves.
- are moving away from magical thinking toward grasping concepts of finality and irreversibility.
- around 6, may have fascination w/ death, killing.
- around 8, may have morbid fascination w/ death rituals, also dreams of death and resurrection.
- material facts around death may seem funny.

### **AGES 9 - 12 (abstract thinking)**

- more realistic sense of death -- often pervasive fear of it.
- feel death is sudden and unpredictable, fear of painful death, poisoning, falling.
- begin to realize universality of death.
- fear of "the void" following death -- inanimate suspension.
- fascination with the physiology -- want to view body, ask "intrusive" or insensitive questions

### **ADOLESCENCE**

- grow increasingly closer to adult views, experiences.
- can begin to be philosophical in viewing death.
- may idealize the deceased, especially if a friend, sibling or parent.
- may experience conflict of needing to be growing independent (appropriate for developmental stage) while needing family support during crisis/grief.
- greatest fears are of separation and non-existence.