

Developmental Stages, Death and Dying



Talking About Death and Dying Across Age Groups

As we know from talking about ALS in general, children process and understand things differently depending on their age and developmental stage. Moreover, how they respond to changes and death also varies by age. To help guide conversations specifically around loss, death, and dying and how you can engage with them, the following section is from a handbook created by *Beth Barrett, MSW*, and The ALS Association St. Louis Regional Chapter. Please feel free to share this with any families you may know who are going through the death, dying or end of life process.



As with the developmental table in an earlier chapter, this section is available for download on The ALS Association's website at www.als.org/navigating-als/resources/Youth-Education

Developmental Stage	Possible Reactions	Suggestions for Engagement
Infants and Toddlers (0-3) Children this age have limited verbal expression and will demonstrate their emotions and discomfort through actions. This age group has no concept of death. They will not understand that a loved one has died but will sense and react to the emotions of parents and other family members.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fussiness, irritability.• Clinginess.• Tears, vomiting.• Regression in behavior such as toileting, sleeping, or eating.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Maintain a regular routine.• Provide nurturance and physical security, such as holding and cuddling with child.• Provide reassurance and patience.• Allow child to play, as this is an outlet for children's grief.

Developmental Stage

Possible Reactions

Suggestions for Engagement

Preschoolers (Age 3–5)

The preschooler is gaining verbal skills and has a strong sense of curiosity. Expect many questions from this age group. Preschoolers may utilize “magical thinking,” such as worrying that something they did or said caused someone’s death or believing that death is reversible. Preschoolers live in the present tense; they will not understand the finality of death. They may also begin to personify death as a person or thing, such as a skeleton or angel of death.

- Numerous, repetitive questions; curiosity about death.
- May appear unconcerned or show little reaction.
- Regression in behavior such as nightmares, toileting, possible violent play.
- Fear of separation.

- Allow questions and talk with child.
- Answer questions honestly and in simple words and terms.
- Use real terms, such as death or dead, not “sleeping” or “gone away.”
- Provide structure and a normal schedule.
- Offer patience, explanations, and assurance.
- Resist punishment for acting out.
- Encourage physical activity and play to express feelings and expend energy.
- You may have to clarify that death is not contagious.

Young Children (Age 6–9)

This age group has developed more cognitive skills and may have a clearer understanding of death. They will begin to understand that they, too, will die someday. (This concept solidifies for older children in this age group.) They have more logical thinking and begin to move away from the magical thinking of earlier years. They may fear death and will begin to be able to mourn. Be aware that while this age group may understand the realities of death, they have not developed sufficient emotional or social skills to deal with their grief. They may need extra attention and support.

- May want details and explanations about death.
- Crying; active mourning
- Will be concerned about others’ feelings.
- Grief expression may come and go.
- May appear anxious or emotional; may “act out.”

- Provide reassurance.
- Respond to their needs and questions honestly and compassionately.
- Allow for creative play through art, stories, etc.
- Encourage physical play as an outlet for grief and energy expression.

Developmental Stage	Possible Reactions	Suggestions for Engagement
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Middle Childhood (Age 10–12)

This age group has developed the understanding that death is final. At this age, death becomes personal. These children may focus on the consequences of the death, such as concerns about having to move, changing plans, or not being able to participate in activities due to the death. They may have curiosity about the biological details of death. This group may not talk as much about death or they may try to be “brave” for other family members.

- Distractedness, denial, guilt, anger.
- School work may suffer; grades may fall.
- May fear leaving home or parents; separation anxiety.
- May put on a “brave face” and not show emotions.
- May withdraw or act out .

- Give permission for expression of feelings.
- Encourage child to ask questions and give honest answers.
- Avoid punishment, but offer encouragement, reassurance, compassion.
- Allow child to NOT be brave by giving them time to express emotions and worries.
- Ask if and how the child might like to be involved in the memorial services.
- Remember to give hugs.

Adolescents (Age 13–19)

Teenagers think abstractly and have full understanding of death. They realize the finality of death and understand that everyone will die. While they have feelings of their own immortality, they also realize how fragile life can be. Their thinking is comparable to an adult’s in many ways, but this age group may not have the social support from peers who understand their grief. They may also be experiencing grief for the first time and these intense feelings can be surprising or frightening.

- Crying, traditional mourning.
- Denial or risk taking.
- Taking on the adult role; being the “man” or “lady” of the house.
- Depression; suicidal thoughts
- Willingness to talk with peers or non-family members about the death.
- Change in behavior at school; grades falling.

- Encourage conversation and expression of grief; be honest.
- Allow child to have time to mourn; do not expect them to take over the adult role.
- Seek out professional help, if needed, such as a school counselor, professional therapist, or clergy.
- Utilize teen support group services.
- Provide love and support.

