**Children’s understanding of death and reactions to loss**

Children’s understanding of death and their reactions to the loss of a significant other will depend on the cognitive ability and previous experiences. A child’s grief, just like an adult’s, is individual and should not be expected to follow any pre -determined pattern. As children develop their understanding of the loss of a loved one changes. They may therefore re-visit the grieving process as they become aware of different implications of their loss. The most common understandings of death by children at certain stages of their development are listed below but should be considered as a guide only.

**Birth to six months**

Babies up to six months old will not understand the concept of death but a baby will experience feelings of separation and abandonment as part of their bereavement. They will be aware that the person is missing, or not there and this can cause the baby to become anxious and fretful. If it is the baby’s parents or carers have been bereaved they can pick up on these feelings and experience grief too.

**Six months to two years**

Young children are able to picture family members in their minds. They will protest the loss of a primary caregiver by loud crying and angry tears, and this could also be true of siblings who have been actively involved with them. It is common for babies to become withdrawn and lose interest in their toys and feeding and they will likely lose interest interacting with others. Toddlers may actively seek the deceased person, making it difficult for grieving parents when for instance they persistently try to find a dead sibling.

**Two years to five years**

At this age children do not understand that death is irreversible and that life functions have been terminated. It is important to talk about the fact that the person has died and answer subsequent questions honestly. If a child is told that someone has gone to sleep, or be taken to Heaven they may become terrified of not waking up themselves, or that the person will come back, as if on a trip somewhere.

Due to their limited understanding children of this age may demonstrate less of a reaction to the news of the death than might be observed by an older child and might promptly go out to play on hearing the news. This does not mean that they do not acre or will not express distress at later times.

The distress about losing a sibling for children under five may be experienced in later life. It will be important for adults to keep memories for them that can be shared at later stages of development.

Bereaved children often believe that their actions, inaction, words, behaviours or thoughts are directly responsible for their sibling’s death. This process is called magical thinking. To avoid feelings of guilt that can continue into adulthood it is essential that you explain to the bereaved child that the death was not in any way their fault or responsibility.

**Five years to ten years**

Children at this developmental stage have a wider understanding of death and what it entails. Most children by the age of seven accept that death is inevitable and that all people including themselves will eventually die. The possibilities of dying in childhood themselves may raise increased anxieties for those who lose a sibling or close friend.

With this in mind it is important that parents are supported to explain the cause of death, the funeral and burial process and what happens to the deceased child’s body in a factual and age appropriate manner. Children will ask many questions and may want to know intricate details pertaining to the death and decomposition of the body. Again, it is vital that children have such details explained to them clearly so that they understand.

Children aged between five and ten often copy the coping mechanisms that they observe in bereaved adults and they may try to disguise their emotions in an attempt to protect other family members. The bereaved child can sometimes feel that they need permission to show their emotions and talk about their feelings. As adults it is important that we give them permission to do this and do not try dismiss their painful feelings.

**Teenagers**

Young people or teenagers have developed a greater understanding of death and the long term implications of their loss. Due to the developmental changes taking place within the young person at this time their reactions to death may be more extreme than in younger siblings. The bereaved young person may have a wider social network from which they could seek support rather than from them than their immediate family whom they will appreciate are also suffering.

The young person’s tasks of grieving are very similar to that of an adult but the young mourner is often unable to manage the strong emotions that bereavement entails and can therefore present as being extremely angry and even end up in physical fights. Some bereaved young people can revert to childish behaviour in order to relocate some security and normality in their lives where as others might try to “grow up too fast” and see themselves as taking on adult roles. This will be complicated if they have also been a young carer.

**Siblings may:**

* Believe that the ‘wrong child’ has died
* Mimic the dead sibling in some way to comfort the parents
* Try to be the perfect child; compelled to replace their dead sibling
* Suffer guilt over past sibling rivalry and regret their inability to make amends
* Feel anger and resentment that they have been abandoned by their dead sibling and parents who may have become emotionally absent whilst struggling with their own grief
* Be unable to express a sense of relief if all previous attention has been focused on the dying child
* Struggle to cope with becoming the focus of attention

Ref: <http://www.cruse.org.uk/Children/children-understanding-death>

The Ghost in the Family. Alison Thompson.