

Mini-Articles: Concepts of Death

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4 Concepts About Death That Children Need to Know

Children are aware of death from an early age. They may lose a pet. They see depictions of death in movies or TV shows (including cartoons). For some, a family member may die.

Many things about death can be confusing to children. There are four essential concepts children need to understand about death before they can truly comprehend a loss. Most will understand these concepts by age 5 to 7, but children who are much younger can be helped to understand them. And even adolescents can raise questions as they try to accept these concepts after a personal loss.

The four concepts are:

1. Death is irreversible.
2. All life functions end completely at the time of death.
3. Everything that is alive eventually dies.
4. There are physical reasons someone dies.

The [*Coalition to Support Grieving Students*](#) (of which this organization is a member) offers [materials on its website that explain these concepts](#) in more detail. You can find suggestions about how to discuss the concepts with children. These discussions can help children cope more effectively if someone they know dies, or if they have a grieving friend or classmate.

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Do Children Want to Talk About Death?

Children are naturally curious, and death is one of the first things they are curious about. In fact, children first seek to engage adults in a dialogue related to life and death when they are only 6-12 months old!

This is the time when children first develop what is called “object permanence”—the concept that someone who is out of view still exists in another place.

To explore this concept, infants all over the world begin to play a game we call peek-a-boo. They see someone. That person disappears (often behind a blanket). The

infant shows heightened awareness and then concern. The blanket falls, the person reappears, and everyone laughs and expresses joy at this reunion.

Infants play this game over and over again, learning something about permanence and loss each time they do so.

As they grow older, children continue to attempt these dialogues with adults, often through play or artwork. Frequently, adults don't understand what children are asking. Children don't know other ways to express their questions.

The [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](#) (of which this organization is a member) offers materials that discuss [concepts of death](#) and describe how school professionals can engage in meaningful and constructive dialogues about death with children and teens. These discussions can help children master necessary information and reduce anxiety. Learn more at the Coalition's website.

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School Professionals Can Help Students Understand Death

Children need to understand [four essential concepts about death](#) before they can truly comprehend a loss.

The four concepts are:

1. Death is irreversible.
2. All life functions end completely at the time of death.
3. Everything that is alive eventually dies.
4. There are physical reasons someone dies.

School professionals who know about these concepts can better understand children's thoughts and reactions to death—an actual loss, a TV show or movie, or even an imagined death. This makes it easier to talk with students. It's also useful when providing advice to parents wanting to help their children cope with a loss.

There are many benefits to meaningful conversations with children about death. For example, when children and teens are not clear about why a person died, they may assume it's because of something they did. They may feel guilty. They may feel they are in some way responsible for the death.

Clear, supportive conversations can help children cope with death in more constructive ways. This can help them manage and resolve feelings of guilt.

Learn more about how to discuss concepts about death with children of all ages and provide appropriate support at the website of the [*Coalition to Support Grieving Students*](#). The website's materials are designed specifically for school professionals.

The Coalition to Support Grieving Students was convened by the New York Life Foundation, a pioneering advocate for the cause of childhood bereavement, and the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, which is led by pediatrician and childhood bereavement expert David J. Schonfeld, M.D. The Coalition has worked with Scholastic Inc., a long-standing supporter of teachers and kids, to create grievingstudents.org, a groundbreaking, practitioner-oriented website designed to provide educators with the information, insights, and practical advice they need to better understand and meet the needs of the millions of grieving kids in America's classrooms.