**DEVELOPMENTAL CONSIDERSATIONS FOR CONVERSATIONS ABOUT DEATH**

Provide accurate and honest information for every developmental stage

**INFANT-TODDLER (0 to 3 years old)**

View death as a loss, separation, or abandonment. They sense sadness or anxiety and are greatly impacted by the response of their caregivers and others around them.

Possible responses/behaviors:

* May exhibit changes in sleeping, eating, and mood (increased clinging, decreased appetite, irritable)
* May have difficulty separating from caregivers

How to help:

* Keep normal routine and structure when possible
* Provide consistent nurturing by parent or other caregivers

**PRESCHOOLERS (3 to 5 years old)**

* Understand words literally
* Difficulty understanding abstract concepts. For example: heaven, spiritual processes
* Magical thinking: Feel that thoughts, actions, or feelings may have caused the death or that death is punishment for doing something bad

Possible responses/behaviors:

* May revert to an earlier stage of development (bed wetting or baby talk)
* May seem unaffected by the death
* May talk very matter of fact about the death
* May exhibit changes in sleeping, eating, behavior
* May have difficult separating from caregivers

How to help:

* When talking about death, use words like death died, and body stopped working.
  + Avoid terms like: passed on, passed away, gone to sleep, and lost
* Keep normal routines/discipline when possible
* Provide opportunities to play, draw, express feelings
* Offer reassurance that nothing the child did, said, or thought caused the death to happen
* Prepare them for what to expect related to funeral/good-bye rituals

**SCHOOL-AGE (5 to 12 years old)**

* May begin to view death as final
* May blame self for death and experience feelings of guilt
* Increased curiosity of illness, death, and what happens to the body/spirit after death
* Open to learning coping tools and emotional support

Possible responses/behaviors:

* May be reluctant to share initially, but later have a strong grief reaction
* May exhibit a wide range of emotions such as shock, denial, anxiety, fear, or withdrawal

How to help:

* Provide permission to cry and to share thoughts and feelings
* Identify specific fears or misconceptions and address worries of potential feelings of guilt
* Provide opportunities for self expression such as play, drawing, art, and journaling
* Offer reflective times to share memories
* Maintain daily routines/discipline when possible
* Encourage participation in funeral/good-bye rituals

**TEEN (12 to 18 years old)**

* Understand that death as inevitable, universal, and irreversible
* Questions the meaning of life, search for meaning in death, and seek spiritual/religious support
* May want to be fully involved with family discussions and decision making
* Complex moral/ethical dilemma processing

Possible responses/behaviors:

* May engage in risk taking behaviors (driving fast, drug/alcohol experimenting, sexually acting out)
* May socially/emotionally withdraw
* May use social media for expression and communication
* May benefit from peer support

How to help:

* Be available, but respectful of need for privacy
* Help them identify peers or other trust adults with whom they can share their feelings
* Discuss changes that may occur in the family structure/dynamics since death
* Model healthy coping behaviors (maintaining activities and routines)

**RECOMMENDED BOOKS FOR CHILDREN GRIEVING THE DEATH OF A LOVED ONE**

**Children**

*When Dinosaurs Die (*A guide to understanding death)

Laurie Kesney Brown and Marc Brown

*I Miss You: A First Look at Death*

Pat Thomas

*Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children*

Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen

*Ocho Loved Flowers*

Anne Fontaine

(Book is about a pet cat that dies, but still applicable for people or pets. Focuses on anticipatory death)

*When Someone Dies*

Sharon Greenlee

*Badger’s Parting Gifts*

Susan Varley

(Good for the death of a grandparent)

*Always and Forever*

Alan Durant

(Good for the death of a grandparent-Similar concept to *Badger’s Parting Gifts*, but with less words)

*What on Earth Do you Do When Someone Dies?*

Trevor Romain

(School-Age+)

*The Invisible String*

Patrice Karst

(Not directly about death, but the story is about remembering that you’re never alone)

**Teenagers**

*Fire in my Heart, Ice in my Veins: A Journal for Teenagers Experiencing a Loss*

Enid Samuel-Traisman, M.S.W.

*Weird is Normal When Teenagers Grieve*

Jenny Lee Wheeler

**For Parents and Caregivers Providing Support for Children/Teens**

*Healing the Grieving Child’s Heart: 100 Practical Ideas For Families, Friends and Caregivers*

Alan Wolfelt

*Healing a Teens’ Grieving Heart*

Alan Wolfelt

*Helping Children Grieve: When Someone They Love Dies* Theresa M. Huntley

*How Do We Tell the Children? A Step-by-Step Guide for Helping Children Cope When Someone Dies*

Dan Schaefer et al

**Pregnancy Loss**

*Something Happened*

Cathy Blanford

**Alzheimer’s**

*Such a Pretty Young Lady : Grandma's Journey with Alzheimer's*  
Bailey Wachholz

[*Grandfather's story cloth*](http://maple.cybertoolsforlibraries.com/cgi-bin/CyberHTML?CMSFHO+164757+4+OPACpick+7530+4) Linda Gerdner

**Feelings**

*In My Heart: A Book of Feelings*

Jo Witek