

A LINE ON LIFE

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Death from a Child's View

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A while ago, a reader asked me if it would help or hurt to take a preschool child to the funeral of a relative. This is a difficult question to answer without knowing the age of the child, the child's overall response to the death, and the ability of the parents to deal with the death and the child's reaction to it. To help all my readers in dealing with this question, this article will cover children's concepts of death, while next week's article will help parents explain death to their children.

Under three years of age. Children under 3 have very little or no understanding of death. However, children will respond to the feelings and emotions expressed by people around them — especially their parents. If the parents are upset by a death, the child will sense these emotions and empathize with them.

Three to five years. At this age, children still have a very limited concept of death. In fact, children may believe that inanimate objects — dolls, toys, rocks — are alive. This misunderstanding indicates that children at this age still have a hard time telling the difference between living and nonliving things.

To three to five-year-old children, death is viewed as a temporary condition — something that is reversible. In their children's games, they "*play dead*." But after the game is over, they become alive again. They are more relaxed and curious about death than any other age group. They ask many questions that are difficult to answer.

Because of their temporary, reversible view of death, many children view it as a journey in which people still move, eat, and grow. They are often concerned about the whereabouts and welfare of the dead person. The children may ask where they have gone or when they will be back. In fact, young John Kennedy — a short time after his father's assassination — asked, "*When is my daddy coming back?*"

Five to nine years. During this period, the concept of death is becoming more factual and accurate. Children recognize the finality of death, and they also start to fear death. Early in this period, most children accept death as an eventuality. However, death happens only to other people — not to them. They may worry that their parents may die and leave them. Excluding accidents, murders, and serious illnesses, they have some understanding that death is more likely with older people.

Later in this period, children suspect that they too may die but may still deny the fact. By nine, most children accept the fact that they will die, but this death is seen in the distant future. They may have preoccupations with hospitals, funerals or burial. In contrast, they

could also be less willing to talk about death, hiding their feelings about highly emotional situations.

Ten and over. By this age, most children can face the notion of death. They can accept and refer to the logic of death and the related biological essentials: "*When you are dead, you have no pulse and do not breathe.*" From this level on, they are ready for as complete an explanation as most adults can give.

Preteens and teenagers. Although older children may look at death realistically, they are more likely to see it as something that happens to older people or those who are very sick. Even though they realize that death happens to everyone, some still view themselves as "*invincible*" — they cannot die until later in life. This feeling of invincibility often continues with some adolescents. These adolescents may take dangerous chances — in games or automobiles, with alcohol or other drugs — since they believe they will not die while they are still young.

If we — as adults — cannot accept our own mortality, how can we explain the concept of death to our children?

Adulthood. Even as adults, some people avoid thinking about their own mortality. They still hold on to the adolescent conviction of invincibility. This may be one reason why some adults don't like to mention their age at birthdays, or they may invest a great deal of money and effort in plastic surgery. They are trying hard to look or seem young. It may be their way of making their inevitable physical decay and death seem much more distant.

In another article, you will receive some hints on how to help your child deal with death.
