

## CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH

### INFORMATION FOR STAFF

Children and young people's understanding of death will depend on their cognitive and developmental stage. They will revisit the loss as they mature, reach significant milestones and become more able to talk about their experiences and questions in relation to death. Children and young people with learning difficulties will progress through the developmental stages at a slower pace or indeed may remain at an early stage in their understanding of death.

Children and young people do experience similar feelings to adults following a death but often express their feelings differently depending on their development age.

Age	Concept of Death	Possible Reactions
2 to 5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Death seen as reversible</li> <li>• May feel they have caused the death</li> <li>• Magical thinking - make up fantasies to fill gaps in knowledge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fears abandonment and separation</li> <li>• Loud protest</li> <li>• Despair</li> <li>• Indignant at changes in patterns or routine</li> <li>• Sleep problems</li> <li>• May revert to "baby" behaviours</li> </ul>
5 to 11 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More exposure to death and understanding of death as permanent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Withdrawal, sadness, loneliness, depression</li> <li>• Anger, guilt, temper tantrums, nightmares</li> <li>• Behaviour, learning or school problems</li> <li>• Perfect child, brave and in control</li> <li>• May become preoccupied with death</li> </ul>
Over 11 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Death permanent</li> <li>• Denial - it can't happen</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Withdrawal, sadness, depression, loneliness</li> <li>• Anger, rejection, guilt</li> <li>• Joking, sarcasm</li> <li>• Dependence or regressing to younger age</li> <li>• Insecurity, low self-esteem</li> </ul>

There is no right or wrong way to grieve. It is important to allow children and young people to grieve in their own way and their own time. They may seesaw in and out of grief, needing time to play and have fun as well as to cry.