



Elizabeth's Smile

Supporting grieving children and their caregivers.

# BASICS *of* GRIEF

*Children's Understanding of  
Death at Different Ages*

You are here because someone you care about is grieving the loss of someone special. We are so sorry for the loss you have faced, and we are also grateful that you are here.

Because you are reading this, we know that you've sought resources and support to bring your best to your relationship with a grieving child, while you also grieve a painful loss. While you can't take away the grief or change what happened, know that you are a gift to the child during this time, and can be for the rest of your life.

We hope the suggestions, information, tips, and ideas give you some clarity and confidence. The most important thing to know is that you already have within you what every child needs: your love, presence, and care.



With Care.

**The Elizabeth's Smile Team**

## Infants and toddlers

Babies and young children have no understanding of the concept of death yet. However, long before they are able to talk, babies can sense and react to changes in their environment – specifically related to separation from one of their primary caregivers, who they rely on for all aspects of care and sustenance.

Up to the age of 6 months, babies may experience a sense of abandonment when a caregiver dies, which often results in increased crying, protesting, and disruption in sleep and feeding routines. From around the age of 8 months or so; infants and toddlers begin to develop a 'mental image' of the person who died and have a sense of 'missing them'. Infants and toddlers at this age may cry more or become more withdrawn; they may lose interest in toys or food and, as they develop motor skills and language, may call out for or search for the person who died. You can help by maintaining their typical routines as much as possible in addition to providing them with emotional and physical soothing when they express their distress.

## Preschoolers

Young children at this age begin to use the word 'dead' and develop an awareness that this concept is different from being alive. Children of this age do not understand abstract concepts like 'forever' and cannot grasp that death is permanent. Their limited understanding may lead to an apparent lack of reaction when told about a death, and they may ask many questions about where the person who has died is and when that person will come back. Children at this age expect the person to return.

Young children tend to interpret what they are told in a literal and concrete way; therefore, it is important to avoid offering explanations of death such as 'lost', 'gone away' or 'gone to sleep' that may cause misunderstandings and confusion. Provide honest answers to their questions but do not feel you have to tell them everything in detail or all at once. Information can build over time.



After a loved one dies, preschool-aged children may have disrupted sleep, changes in appetite, less interest in play and may become more anxious about separation even when being left with familiar adults. There may also be regression in previously acquired skills such as language (i.e., reverting back to baby talk) or toilet training (i.e., wetting the bed).

## **School-age children**

Between the ages of 5 and 7 years, children gradually begin to develop an understanding that death is permanent and irreversible and that the person who has died will not return. Children who have been bereaved when they were younger will likely re-process what has happened as they develop awareness of the finality of death.

Children's imagination and 'magical thinking' at this age can mean that some children may believe that their thoughts or actions caused the death. Not being given sufficient information in age-appropriate language can lead them to 'make-up' and fill in the gaps in their knowledge. Children increasingly become aware that death is an inevitable part of life that happens to all living things. As a result, they can become anxious about their own, and others', health and safety.

Children at this age benefit from honest answers to their questions that can be built on over time, and opportunities to express their feelings. They also greatly benefit from reassurance that nothing they said, did, or thought caused their person's death.

## Teenagers

Adolescence is a time of great change and grief often impacts the developmental task of moving from dependence to independence – moving from familial ties to increased involvement with peers. It can, therefore, be difficult for teenagers to ask for support while trying to demonstrate independence. Young people do not like to feel different from their peers, and being a grieving young person can be isolating.

Teenagers will have a more mature understanding of the concept of death but often have their own beliefs and strongly held views, and may challenge the beliefs and explanations offered by others.

Some young people may respond to a death by becoming more withdrawn, some may 'act out' their distress while others cope with the awareness of their own mortality through risk-taking behavior. Others may take on adult responsibilities and become 'the caregiver' for those around them. Keeping to the usual boundaries of acceptable behavior can be reassuring for bereaved young people.

Young people who have been bereaved at an earlier age may re-process their grief as they think about and plan for their future and fully understand the impact of life without the person who died.



# We're here for you.

If you or anyone else need support, we're here to help. We want you to know you're not alone, and it's also incredibly important for you to remind your niece she's not alone.

We will be producing a wide range of guides similar to this one for children and the people around them. If you know someone who could benefit from a guide, but don't see one that pertains to their situation available on our website, please reach out to us at [info@elizabeth.org](mailto:info@elizabeth.org)

Thank you for turning to us in such a difficult time. We hope you found this resource helpful, and that it provides some comfort to you and your family.

For more resources, please visit  
[elizabeth.org](https://elizabeth.org)



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