

# Children's understanding of death at different ages:

Developmental capacities and how this shapes the support you provide to families



the Grief-Sensitive Healthcare Project

[griefsensitivehealthcare.org](http://griefsensitivehealthcare.org)

## Families may ask you how they can explain death to their children.

Your answer will vary depending on the child's age and developmental level. Here is some information to help you guide parents on what they can say and do to help their children make sense of a death.

Age group	Developmentally, they...	As a healthcare provider, you may...
Infants & Toddlers	Can sense when a caregiver is gone, and when caregivers have strong feelings. Can miss someone.	Encourage families to stick to their normal routine as much as possible. Encourage families to provide reassurance and comfort to infants & toddlers.
Preschoolers	May be interested in death, but do not understand its permanence or irreversibility.	Encourage families to use accurate words rather than euphemisms that children won't understand like "passed away," "lost," or "gone."
School-age	Have a fuller understanding of death. May be anxious about others dying. May ask hard questions.	Encourage families to give honest information over time. This will prevent children from 'filling in the blanks' with inaccurate or self-blaming ideas about the death.
Teenagers	Understand the permanence of death. May be anxious about their own death. May rely on peer relationships.	Encourage families to maintain their usual boundaries of acceptable behavior rather than becoming more lenient. Inform families that teenagers often benefit from connecting with peers who have had similar experiences.

Adapted from information kindly provided by [Child Bereavement UK](http://ChildBereavementUK.org)