



## Chaplaincy Services

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A small, light brown teddy bear is sitting on a stone path in a forest. The bear is seen from the back, looking towards a bright, sunlit area in the distance. The background is a soft-focus green forest.


**When a Brother  
or Sister Dies  
Helping Your  
Other Children**

**Children's  
Understanding of  
Death**

**Quick Answers to  
Typical Questions  
Parents Have**

How Children Understand Death

# How Children Understand Death



## **Age Newborn to 10 Months:**

Infants experience the changes in the behavior and emotions of the significant people around them. They will especially be touched by their mother's grieving, as she is the individual through whom the infant is connected to the world. It will be important to keep to as much of a schedule as possible, minimize other stresses such as exposure to many unfamiliar people.

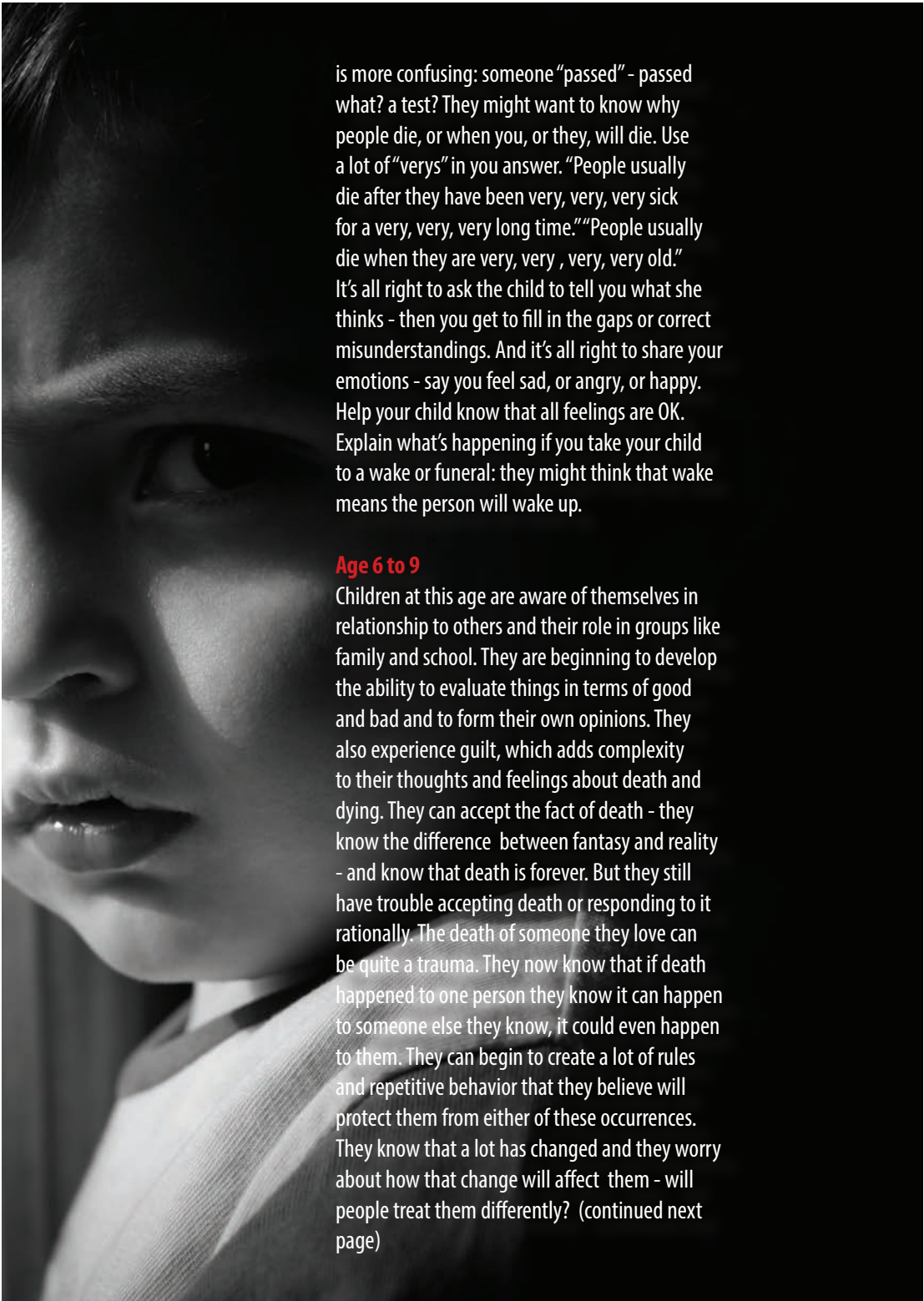
## **Age 10 Months to 2 years:**

The range of feelings children can experience and express greatly increases. Children of this age have added language as a means of connection and are influenced by the words and tone that others use. They recognize themselves as more independent and will enjoy testing this independence, moving away and returning from trusted others. They like repetition in all forms. They can be profoundly affected by the death of someone known to them. Again, keep to routine as much as possible; increase (if possible) times for playing together, reading, and snuggling. Minimizing strange faces, voices, sounds, and scents can be helpful. Use language - it's okay to say, "Daddy gone" or "Billy no more."

## **Age 2 to 5**

Children in this age group are more aware of themselves, tend to place themselves at the center of interest or activity (are pretty egocentric), are very literal in their understanding and interpretation of the world, and are very curious. Their view of death is that it is temporary and that someone can return from being dead. They will want concrete language and concepts that make sense to them.

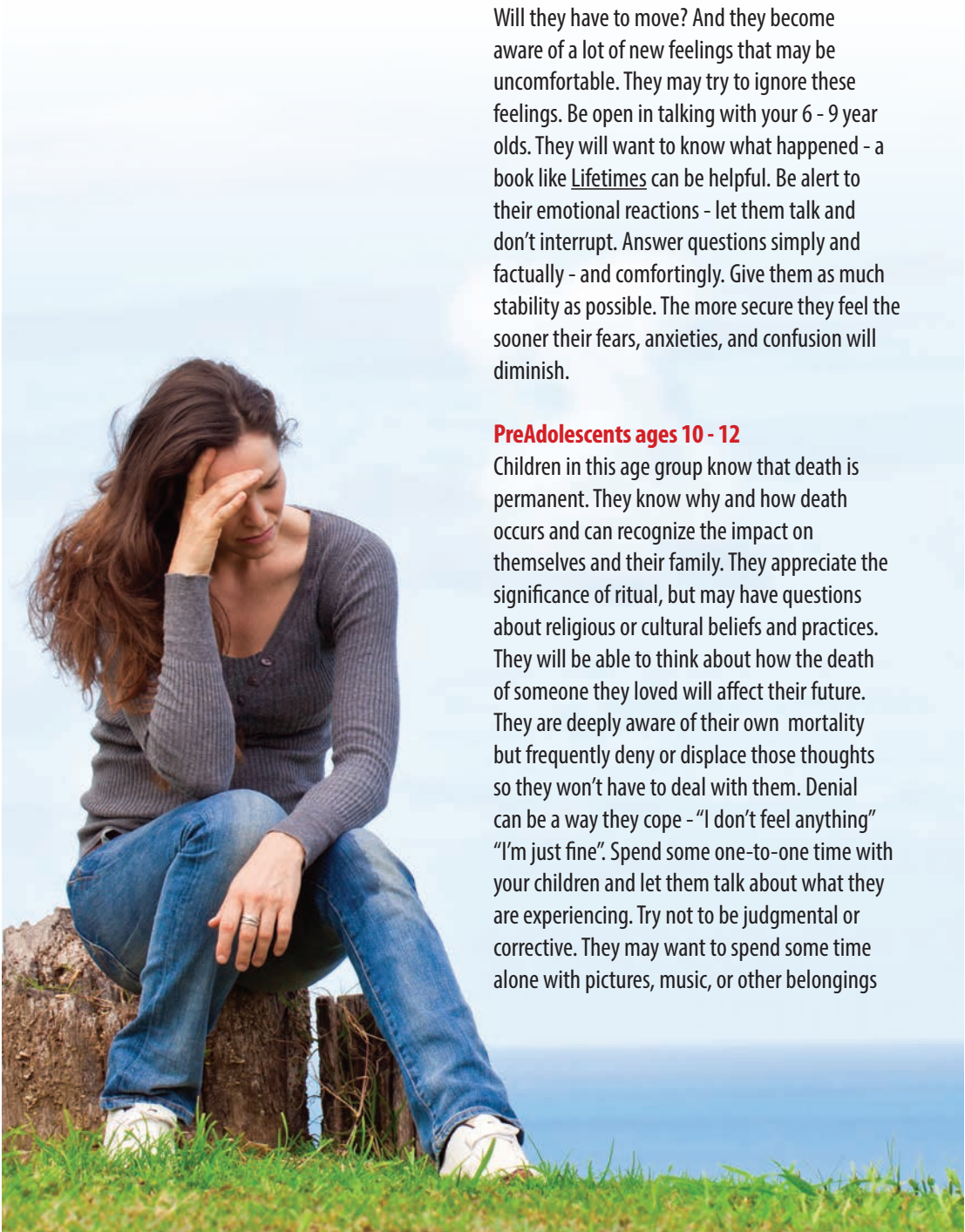
Explain that death means your body has totally stopped - no breathing, no eating, no walking. It is important to emphasize that death is not sleeping. Use the word "died." Other language



is more confusing: someone “passed” - passed what? a test? They might want to know why people die, or when you, or they, will die. Use a lot of “verys” in you answer. “People usually die after they have been very, very, very sick for a very, very, very long time.” “People usually die when they are very, very, very, very old.” It’s all right to ask the child to tell you what she thinks - then you get to fill in the gaps or correct misunderstandings. And it’s all right to share your emotions - say you feel sad, or angry, or happy. Help your child know that all feelings are OK. Explain what’s happening if you take your child to a wake or funeral: they might think that wake means the person will wake up.

### **Age 6 to 9**

Children at this age are aware of themselves in relationship to others and their role in groups like family and school. They are beginning to develop the ability to evaluate things in terms of good and bad and to form their own opinions. They also experience guilt, which adds complexity to their thoughts and feelings about death and dying. They can accept the fact of death - they know the difference between fantasy and reality - and know that death is forever. But they still have trouble accepting death or responding to it rationally. The death of someone they love can be quite a trauma. They now know that if death happened to one person they know it can happen to someone else they know, it could even happen to them. They can begin to create a lot of rules and repetitive behavior that they believe will protect them from either of these occurrences. They know that a lot has changed and they worry about how that change will affect them - will people treat them differently? (continued next page)



Will they have to move? And they become aware of a lot of new feelings that may be uncomfortable. They may try to ignore these feelings. Be open in talking with your 6 - 9 year olds. They will want to know what happened - a book like Lifetimes can be helpful. Be alert to their emotional reactions - let them talk and don't interrupt. Answer questions simply and factually - and comfortingly. Give them as much stability as possible. The more secure they feel the sooner their fears, anxieties, and confusion will diminish.

### **PreAdolescents ages 10 - 12**

Children in this age group know that death is permanent. They know why and how death occurs and can recognize the impact on themselves and their family. They appreciate the significance of ritual, but may have questions about religious or cultural beliefs and practices. They will be able to think about how the death of someone they loved will affect their future. They are deeply aware of their own mortality but frequently deny or displace those thoughts so they won't have to deal with them. Denial can be a way they cope - "I don't feel anything" "I'm just fine". Spend some one-to-one time with your children and let them talk about what they are experiencing. Try not to be judgmental or corrective. They may want to spend some time alone with pictures, music, or other belongings

of the dead person. Then, you can offer an opportunity to talk about that if they want. Help them understand that the family has changed but it is still a family. Ask about their concerns for the future and reassure them appropriately. If someone else begins to assume some of the role of the deceased person assure your preadolescent that this is not a “replacement” - no one can replace that special person - (continued next page) but it is a way to continue living that is sometimes necessary. If your child is very angry or acts out, seek some professional help. It shows you care.

### **Adolescents**

Teens can think abstractly and reason logically, they have personal values, strengths and weaknesses which are very important to them. Death is the complete opposite of everything important to them at this point in their lives. Their understanding on a cognitive level is similar to adults, but their emotional responses are ones of constant change and upheaval. They feel full of life and are convinced they are untouchable, so a death can increase their emotional turmoil. They may fluctuate between denial, guilt, anger, fear, and regression to more childlike thinking. They are concerned with how this impacts their life and their future. When faced with the reality of mortality they can become depressed and withdrawn. Answer questions truthfully and

simply. Give the information asked for - and wait for the next question. Let them participate as fully as they want to in all rituals, ceremonies, family gatherings, and decision making. Encourage them to stay in touch with their friends and to keep to as normal a schedule as possible. And be alert to the signs of depression: a lot of sleeping, change in eating patterns, expressions of helplessness. Encourage them to talk to you, a school counselor, or another adult they trust.

Typical Questions Adults Have About Talking with Their Children

### **How Do We Tell Them?**

Simply, lovingly, with honest words. Don't be hesitant to use the word “died” or “dead”. Words like “lost” or “passed” are confusing and increase children's anxiety. Do not say that a loved one has gone to sleep - it may frighten children about going to bed.

How do we answer the “why” question?

Admit you wonder “why” yourself. This is a hard question. But you might say that death is a part of life for all living things. It happens to everyone and everything at some time. But we can't control when. No one is to blame - not the person who died, and not them. Nothing they said or did caused the death of this special person. If your faith or culture explains (continued next page)



the role of God in death in a unique way, you might remind your children of that. Be simple. And give them time to hear and ask further questions.

### **How do I discuss religious ideas about death with my children?**

Simply, with concrete words and short sentences. We suggest that you avoid concepts like “God took her” or “God wanted him” because these can create fear for younger children and resentment for older children. Does your God care about people and grieve with them when they are sad? Say so. Do you believe that God stays near to protect and love us? Say so. Do you believe that God will take good care of the person who died? Say so. Then wait to find out what else your child wants to know.

### **Should the children attend the wake, funeral, burial?**

As much as possible let the children decide what they want to do. Explain simply what each event is like and answer questions briefly. Let them have options. For instance, they may want to go to the funeral home but not into the room with the body. Or they may choose to go to the funeral but not the burial. Be sure to let them know if the casket will be open.

### **Does it hurt my children to cry and grieve?**

No. And don't be concerned about showing your emotions in front of your children. This is good modeling for their grief.

### **What if my grief makes it too hard to care for my children?**

If you take care of yourself and your grief it shouldn't. And it's OK to take some time off from being the mother/father who is always there and able to do everything. Ask a family member or friend for help. Rest, eat well, seek the comfort you need. Someone else can make lunch - then you can find time and energy to play a bit or read a story with your children. Do the activities with them that you both enjoy and that are special to you.

Should I tell our children's teachers about the death?

Yes. As soon as possible. Teachers can

help monitor how your children are coping in the weeks and months ahead. Let the school counselor know as well and remember them as resources for you and your child - they can help if assignments or schedules need to shift, or if your child needs some brief counseling. It can also be helpful to let other people in your child's life know as well - even the dentist or primary physician, scout leader, Sunday school teacher - so on the next visit the professional can both be compassionate and watchful for signs of distress. How might my children react to a death and how should we respond?

Some children will be very sad and tearful, some will seem to not care, some might feel guilty because they had been angry with their loved one recently, they might feel fearful that they too will die or you will die. Some will regress and act like a younger child, returning to thumb sucking, carrying around a blanket or stuffed animal. There might even be temper tantrums. All of this is normal - for a while. Set limits, but be able to be patient. When you feel you can't cope, find a friend or family member to help.

When is it OK for my children to play again?  
When they feel like it. Children grieve in "pieces." One minute they will be crying and the next full of laughter. Play is the way children work. It allows them to

express their grief physically and relieve the stress they feel through moving.

What is the most important thing for me to do for my children?

Don't disappear. Let them know that even though you are sad and grieving you will be there for them, caring for them, loving them. Be honest in answering their questions, and give them space and time to grieve in their own ways.

Typical Responses and Fears of Children  
RESPONSE OF denial, sadness, anxiety, physical aches, behavior problems, anger/blame, guilt, indifference.

**FEARS:** of illness, of hospitals and medical personnel, of other persons dying, of death itself and what lies beyond.

Helpful and Unhelpful Ways for Parents to Behave

**HELPFUL:** take care of yourself, work on your own grief/feelings, let other children grieve in their own ways, remember the child who died, spend time with other children, give other children space.

**UNHELPFUL:** don't use trite sayings, don't idealize dead child, don't compare dead child to other children, don't try to replace dead child with surviving children.



**For more information, contact  
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