



Children's Understanding of Death - Developmental Stages

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Many (adults) question how much children really do understand about death. There are three components involved in a complete understanding of the concept of death:

- **NONFUNCTIONALITY** - *the fact that once something dies, all physical functions cease*
- **IRREVERSIBILITY** - *something that has died cannot come back to life*
- **UNIVERSALITY** - *all living things will eventually die*

The understanding of each of these components varies with each child, based on their own personal experience with death. Outlined below are *general* guidelines for children's understanding of the concept of death.

Ages 2-4

- **NONFUNCTIONALITY:** Children of this age tend to think that all things that can move are alive.
- **IRREVERSIBILITY:** Children of this age believe that something that is "dead" can come back to life (i.e., cartoons enforce this).
- **UNIVERSALITY:** Children of this age, in their egocentric view of the world, believe that they will never die. In fact, the fact that they *could* die is not a concept that would enter their minds (unless they've experienced the death of someone close to them who is the same age).

Ages 5-8

- **NONFUNCTIONALITY:** This is the age where children begin to understand that when something dies, the physical functions cease.
- **IRREVERSIBILITY:** Children of this age begin to understand that once something dies, it cannot come back to life (especially true for plants, animals, and insects).
- **UNIVERSALITY:** Children still don't take death personally - they perceive that it only happens to "old" or "sick" people.

Ages 9-10+

By ages 9 or 10, children begin to have a complete understanding of all three components which leads to a mature understanding of the concept of death.

It is very important to realize that although a very young child may not fully understand what it means when someone dies, it does not discount the fact that they will grieve the very real loss and change they are experiencing in their lives.

