Children’s Concept of Death

Infant and Toddlers
- See separation in terms of “Peek-a-Boo” (in which objects appear and disappear) or making things “all gone”
- May fear being dropped, hungry, or left alone; may fear the dark
- No concept of time or death

Preschool: 3 – 5 years
- Death is associated with sleep and separation
- Death is reversible, temporary, will not get them
- Think dead can feel, eat, drink as if still alive
- Death means “less alive” or “broken”
- Magical thinking; believe entire world is alive (clouds, toys, rivers, etc.)
- Family religious beliefs affect child’s response

5 – 6 years
- Death is gradual, still temporary
- Believe there is a degree of death, such as “not very badly killed”
- Life and death interchangeable; “When tired of being dead – someone else can be dead”
- Begin to accept death as happening to other people, but only when they are old

6 – 9 years
- Morbid phase – “boogie men” and “monsters”
- Hope to avoid death, being “good” or “lucky”
- Death related questions reflect interest in their own bodies and how they function
- Fear punishment and mutilation which they associate with death
- Play is sometimes obsessed with death
- To protect themselves from fear, they often create stories, jokes about death
- Strongly influenced by reaction, attitudes of others, especially parents

10 – 12 years
- Most have near adult concept of death
- View death as final and inevitable
- Often question, “If I die, who would get my room” or “feed my pet,” etc.
- Feel more guilty
- May ask questions about funeral services, embalming procedures
- List old age, cancer, etc., as likely reasons for death
- Realization of death is a tremendous threat to their sense of security and self image
- Often show fear through uncooperative behavior – somehow rudeness or stubbornness is a plea for control and power over their fear
- Adults should
  - Encourage children to talk over feelings and provide outlets for aggression through play
  - Stress we all do things we are sorry for
  - Explain, repeat, allow as much involvement in preparation as desired

Adolescents
- Death is understood in relation to the “natural law” of things in life
- Understand ideas of time, space, quantity and casualty, which adds to their framework of death
- Least likely to accept end of life, especially their own
- Search for meaning and values related to death
- Risk taking attempts to “defy” death
- Try to put death aside, are concerned with life

The information presented is intended for general information and educational purposes. It is not intended to replace the advice of your health care provider. Contact your health care provider if you believe you have a health problem.