

# Developmental Attitudes About Death

(By Pattie Robinson)

## **STAGE 1 ( 2 years to approximately 3 years)**

The very young child does not understand that death is final. He associates it with things he knows. He may think it is like sleeping – you go to sleep and then you wake up again. Or it may be perceived as leaving – you're here, you leave, then you come back again. The concepts of time and permanence have no meaning to a young child. It's like the children's game of Peek-A-Boo, one minute you are there and the next minute you are gone. For the young child, death is an issue of separation. It is accorded no more meaning than if the parent leaves to go to work or to the store. Young children may cry or be upset about any form of separation from the parent, whether it be from a trip to the store or from death.

Because very young children do not understand death and they are very egocentric in their beliefs about how the world works, they assume that all people do just what they do. Therefore, if the child sleeps, plays, brushes his teeth, he assumes that all other people do the same thing, even if they are in a coffin. Since the child perceives death in this manner, he probably will not understand the sadness around him. He may ask people why they are crying and then not understand the reply.

## **STAGE 2 (3 years to approximately 4-5 years)**

As a child continues to cognitively develop, he begins to hear people talk about death and will probably be exposed to it, usually through television. Since time concepts such as forever have no meaning to the child of this developmental age, he will normally be unconcerned about his own death or the death of others. He may see cartoons, such as "The Roadrunner," where the coyote goes through experiences where he should die (falling off a cliff, for example), but he gets up and continues with his pursuit of the roadrunner. This idea makes total sense to the preschool child.

Children this age perceive their bodies as composed of individual parts, not as a whole. As they begin to notice that things die or they hear death discussed, they may develop fears about injury to parts of their bodies and equate that injury to death. Drawings by children in this age group usually show body parts unattached to one another and the scenes drawn may have no understandable connection to death as we adults understand it.

Older children in this age range may begin to notice and ask questions about inconsistencies they observe. For example, why does the cartoon coyote get up and run away after he is flattened by a truck, but the cat that is run over by a truck on the freeway is dead?

When the death of a significant other occurs, changes in a child's behavior may be noted. The child may regress, wetting the bed or sucking a thumb. He or she may become aggressive or overly clinging. It's normal for the child to attach to substitutes for the deceased person, such as teachers or neighbors.

### **STAGE 3 (5 or 6 years of age to approximately 11 years)**

It is in this age range that children begin to actually understand death and what it means. The younger child may still be unable to fully understand the abstract concepts of death forever. He may believe it happens to some people but not necessarily to everyone. He thinks if people are lucky, take care of themselves, or are good, they may live forever. Automobile accidents are a way that children of this age commonly think that people die.

By seven or eight years of age, most children understand that death is a reality and everyone will die, but usually not until they are very old. Their first experience with death may occur during this time, with the death of a pet. Death is often associated with violence, particularly dismemberment, a conception of death relating to injury of body parts remaining from early childhood. They may fear the death of their parents and express concern about who will care for them if their parents die.

As the child begins to understand that children die, fear develops and an approach/avoidance phenomenon begins to occur. The child is afraid of death and yet fascinated by it. He doesn't want to think about it and yet thinking about it seems inevitable. He begins to personify death as a means of allowing him to explore ideas about death and experience some of his fear while, at the same time, he can tell himself that what he is experiencing is only make believe. Personification is the act of attributing projected fears about death to beings who are instruments of death. Examples of these are skeletons, space creatures and monsters. Drawings by children in this age range usually are of violent death, automobile accidents, graveyard scenes, personifications and/or blood.

Children at this age are fascinated with the physiological aspects of death. They may want to touch dead things, poke them with a stick or cut them open to see the insides. They may ask questions about such things as decomposition and autopsies. These are normal behaviors.

### **STAGE 4 (11 or 12 years of age through adult)**

At this age children become realistic about death. They understand that it is inevitable and random. They develop this awareness through observation of things which occur in their environment and by the cognitive development of abstract thinking. Death is acknowledged as a permanent end to bodily life. It is final and it happens to everyone, including a child.

For most children, the fear of death continues. As they advance into their teen years, they may attempt to deal with these fears by becoming involved with religion or debating issues related to death, such as reincarnation or whether women should be able to fight in battle. They may

explore philosophies that offer alternatives to permanency of death, such as reincarnation. These coping mechanisms continue into adulthood. Adults may attempt to ignore the idea of death or they may begin to come to grips with their own memorial service. Drawings by older children and adults are usually abstract in content. They may be colorful designs, religious depictions, or drawings that indicate a perception of a barrier or difference between this life and some other plane of existence.

In our society, very few people attempt to face the inevitability of their own death. They live in denial because to do anything else is too frightening.

The mentally disabled individual perceives death on his or her developmental age. Drawings done by these individuals will most always correspond to those of children with the same developmental (mental age) level. For example, the 15 year old with a mental age of nine years will usually draw a graveyard depiction, a monster or a picture showing some type of violence.