

## **Developmental Perceptions of Death:**

### **Extended Abstract of Senior Thesis**

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Death is a complex concept to grasp onto and understand as it has numerous biological, socio-cultural, spiritual and emotional elements (Longbottom & Slaughter, 2018). Such a topic may be difficult to discuss and perhaps even feared by many. It is this fear of death which may be especially instilled in children, stemming from all that is unknown about what really happens when a person dies. Gaining an understanding of children's perceptions of death not only remains prevalent through society but also provides positive implications for family members and caregivers of children who are exposed to such means in their earlier years of life.

Each person is unique to their understanding of death along with their response to grief. Such understanding, especially within children, is largely influenced by their developmental level and age. Specifically, typical grief responses of children in preschool include confusion, frightening dreams, night agitation, along with regressive behaviors such as clinging, bed wetting, thumb sucking, temper tantrums and withdrawal from others (Himebauch, Arnold, & May, 2008). A tremendous overlap can also exist among age groups because children tend to move from one developmental level to another at varied rates. For instance, since preschoolers are typically present-oriented, their grief reactions can be brief but very intense. It is at this developmental stage that children are beginning to learn values of trust along with forming basic attachments (Longbottom & Slaughter, 2018). Therefore, when a significant adult in their life dies they may become concerned about separation and altered patterns of care which is new to

the child. This change can henceforth influence a heightened sense of anxiety since at their very young age, they have not developed the capacity to use their minds to gain control over what is happening. Additionally, the adults in a child's life influences their well-being as they will respond to the emotional reactions of the adults. As an example, if they sense that their parents are worried or sad, they may in turn cry or have a tantrum because they are concerned about this changing behavior. It is likely that a child experiencing such hardships will search for the deceased person despite the existing assurances that the person will not be returning.

The topic of grief and perception of death can be explored throughout children of different ages. This concept of mature death can also be defined in terms of several sub-concepts including (1) irreversibility: the understanding that death is a permanent state from which there is no return to life; (2) inevitability: the understanding that all living things must die eventually; (3) applicability: the understanding that only living things can die; (4) cessation: the understanding that all bodily processes cease to function upon death; and (5) causation: the understanding that death is ultimately caused by a breakdown of bodily functions (Longbottom & Slaughter, 2018). These five components relate directly to the developmental level of the child at the time in which they experience death of a loved one. It is hypothesized that the provided sub-concepts of mature death are perceived consistently in a developmental pattern among children of various ages.

Through observational research, children between the ages of six and thirteen were questioned in terms of the means that are consistent with the sub-concepts of mature death. Their understanding of death along with their patterns of grief were analyzed and compared between measures. Overall, knowing how children's concept of death is constructed provides parents and caregivers with important information and helps them respond more sensitively to what children might feel and experience. The idea that children may not be able to fully grasp the fact that their

loved one is dead, or gone forever, was specially exemplified through participant 4 in the observational study. Similarly, as seen in participants 1 and 2, children may struggle with accepting the idea that their loved one has passed and further influence negative emotional factors as well as their actions and growing tendencies as they grow into the next developmental stage. Additionally, after questioning the person of interest for this study, a clinical psychologist who specialized in bereavement therapy, one could also further relate those answers to the findings in previous research in regards to Longbottom and Slaughter's (2018) five mature sub-concepts of death.

Though it may be challenging to discuss this rather complex topic, this research may be relevant to families dealing with palliative care when caregivers are deciding whether or not to open discussions to their children about impending death. Adults should keep in mind that their communications about death affect both the child's growing understanding as well as how the child will approach the topic in their turn. Findings involving the five sub-concepts of death conclude that the irreversibility factor is almost always understood first, as early as age 3, and causation is acquired last, usually by age 8 (Longbottom & Slaughter, 2018). Evidently, knowing how children's concept of death is perceived and constructed provides parents, caregivers and families with positive implications and helps them respond more sensitively to what children might feel and experience.

## References

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