

Explaining the Funeral to Your Children

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At what age should children attend a funeral?

When deciding whether your child should attend a funeral or memorial service, age is not the most important consideration. Your child is part of the family, and children who are old enough to love are old enough to grieve. No child is too young to attend a funeral, provided that the child is prepared for what will happen and what they will see at the funeral home, and is lovingly guided through the process. Shutting children out makes them feel alone, and conveys the idea that death and grief are too horrible to be faced. Children need to learn that special, loved people do die – but also that there will always be somebody to take care of them.

How should I explain death to my children?

Death can be explained to children the same way we explain other important milestones: Offer the facts in a simple, honest, straightforward, non-threatening, caring way.

- Be honest, and keep it simple. Children know when adults are shading the truth.
- First find out what the child already knows or thinks s/he knows about death.
- Validate feelings and encourage children to share their thoughts, fears and observations about what is happening.
- Explain that in the circle of life all living things will die someday, and that death causes changes in a living thing.
- Avoid euphemisms such as, “passed away,” “sleeping,” and “lost.”
- Explain what dead means: “Grandma died. Her heart stopped beating and she doesn’t breathe in and out anymore. She doesn’t need to eat or go to the bathroom. She cannot see, hear or move, and she cannot feel pain. Being dead is not the same as sleeping. All your body parts work when you are sleeping. When a person dies, her body has stopped working. The part of Grandma that was alive is gone. All that’s left is her body – like an egg shell without the egg.”
- Explain how we might feel when someone dies: sad, mad, or confused – and we may cry sometimes.
- Don’t hide your own feelings. Feeling, showing and verbalizing one’s own pain gives children an example to follow, while holding back implies that feelings are to be suppressed. Let your children know that grief is a family affair.

If your child is willing, let him/her help whenever possible, for example with

- Picking out the casket
- Placing a note, drawing, special object or memento in the casket
- Selecting clothing, jewelry for the deceased to wear
- Selecting songs, music, readings

How can I prepare my child for the visitation / viewing / funeral / wake?

Children need to know who will be there, what will happen, where the service will take place and when, and why you are doing this. If possible, you can take your children to visit the mortuary, funeral home or house of worship ahead of time. Show them where to find the restroom, drinking fountain and play area, and remind them that they don't have to stay there the whole time if they don't want to – explain that they can go outside with an adult to play or go for a walk.

Explain the purpose of these events: a coming together of families and friends – a reunion, so to speak, in order to

- Say thank you, I love you, and goodbye to the special person who has died
- Celebrate the life of the person who died
- Honor, affirm, remember and pay our last respects to the person
- Receive comfort and support and be with people who care
- Share stories, laughter and tears with others who knew our special person
- Allow for a search for meaning within each person's belief and value system

Help children anticipate seeing others expressing a wide variety of feelings, including laughter as well as tears, and let them know that any and all of these feelings are okay.

Request a special viewing for children. If your funeral director provides such a service, he or she may be willing to meet with the children to explain what happens before and after a funeral. In any event, you'll want to be sure that your children understand:

- What death is
- That the funeral director carefully goes to the hospital or home to pick up the body
- That the body is taken to the funeral home to be kept until it is buried or cremated
- How embalming is like a blood exchange, only using special chemicals
- How the body is made ready for viewing (bathed, dressed, hair combed, makeup applied)
- What the casket is, and how it looks: "A special box that holds the body, made of wood or metal, with carrying handles and a top that can be opened and closed. The inside looks a little like a bed with a pillow."
- How the person's body is placed in the casket, usually with the top part of the lid open, with the person's legs just underneath the lower part of the lid
- What's in the viewing room and what the children will see
- That the "viewing" is a time when people can come to see the body of the person who has died and share their sadness with one another
- Where the funeral service will be held (funeral home, religious house of worship, at the grave-site) and that it may include hymns, scripture readings, a short sermon, prayers for the person who has died, and speeches (eulogies) about the person's life
- If there will be a burial, how the casket is taken to the cemetery in a hearse (a special car that carries the casket with the dead body)

- How everyone follows in a funeral procession (a quiet parade of cars) to the cemetery (where dead people are buried)
- How everyone gathers around the grave (a special hole that's already been dug in the ground) and words and prayers are spoken. Sometimes the casket is lowered into the grave and family members will gently toss handfuls of dirt onto the top; other times the cemetery workers cover the coffin with dirt after the people have left.
- That later a monument (a stone or marker) is placed at the grave to mark the place where the body is buried: "It tells Grandma's name, birthday, date of death, and maybe a special saying or poem of loving memory. Later when we visit the cemetery, we can go to the grave to remember and feel close to Grandma, because the love we have for each other continues to live on, even after our special person has died."
- That after the service, everyone will gather at the family home or some other location for more expressions of sympathy

After the question-and-answer time, you can arrange for your children to have their own time to spend with their parents and the person who died to:

- Touch the person or the casket if they want to
- Draw a picture
- Visit with guests
- Share memories of the person who has died

What if it's a closed casket?

If viewing the body isn't possible or culturally appropriate, you can still explain death to your child (see above).

What if the body is cremated?

Explain the process of cremation: "There is a special building called a crematorium. In this building is a room— not like any room in our house. Because Grandma is dead, she will not feel anything at all during cremation. A body without life cannot feel heat or pain. This special room is very, very hot – hot enough to turn the body into very fine, very soft ash. What is left of a dead body is called cremains. The cremains may be put into a small container called an urn. The urn may be buried in the ground or placed in a special building, or the cremains may be scattered in a beautiful place, such as over a lake or on a mountain."

What if the person's body or body parts will be donated?

Explain that some families choose to have the person's body or body parts donated: "Grandma gave permission to the doctor to use part(s) of her body. It was her wish to give this very special gift to someone else."

What if my child doesn't want to attend?

It's been said that families who love together grieve together. Encourage your children to go to the funeral or memorial service. Explain that you are a family and this is an

important family event. Let them know that you expect them to go with you. Say that it is important to you to have them there with you. Ask them to attend for your sake.

If a child absolutely refuses to go, don't force the issue. Instead, you can:

- Make sure the child isn't made to feel guilty for not attending.
- Take pictures and make them available whenever the child wants to see them
- Make a video or tape recording of the proceedings
- Write an account of the service: who was there, what happened, who said what
- Tell the child you are available to talk about it whenever s/he is ready

What if I'm the one who doesn't want to go?

Saying, "I want to remember her as she was" is equivalent to saying, "I'm afraid to look at her and at what has happened, and I'm afraid of my feelings." Sometimes we fear "falling apart" in front of others. It may help to think of the funeral or memorial service as an opportunity for remembering and celebrating your loved one's life rather than her death.

What if I'm too upset myself to be there for my children?

- Tell the children exactly how you're feeling. Explain that they can count on someone else to be there for them in addition to yourself.
- Ask a family member or close friend who knows your children to sit with you and care for your children at times, as needed.
- Ask if someone at the funeral home can stay near the children and answer their questions.
- Assign someone to sit in back or near the end of your row, so they can leave the service unobtrusively and step outside with your children if they become too restless.

What if others criticize my decision to include my children in the service?

As a parent, it is your job to teach your children how to cope with the realities of life. Keep in mind that you are the one who knows your children best, and it is you who must deal with their feelings later on. To shut your children out of such a rich and valuable life lesson is to deprive them of an opportunity to grow. Letting them participate in the family rituals of grief and mourning shapes how they will cope with future losses and ultimately with their own mortality as well. No doubt there will be some friends and family members who'll say they cannot bear to see your little ones suffer; they may tell you your children are too young, they won't understand, they'll be afraid or they'll be a disturbance. Usually people feel this way because it is they themselves who are so upset. Know that protecting children from death is a mistake. It is up to all of us to remove the dark shroud of fear from death, and help our children see it as a sad but natural part of living.

My child is crying one minute and laughing the next. Is that normal?

Children experience grief in small doses, and moving in and out of grief is natural for them. Let your children know that crying, laughing and playing are okay, and that you respect their need to be children at this sad and difficult time.

If your child's behavior is disturbing others, explain to the older children that there are acceptable ways to behave at funerals and that you expect them to be considerate of the feelings of other mourners. If your child is too young to understand that concept, activate the plan you've already put in place, and ask the person you've assigned to remove your child from the situation.

I know what I want to tell my children, but how can I control what others say to them?

Listen to what others may be telling your children. Comments such as "Be brave" or "Be strong" are telling a child how to feel. Statements such as "Don't cry," "Be extra nice to your mother now," "You're the man of the family now," or "Your daddy wouldn't want you to be sad" are telling a child how to act. Sometimes children are given conflicting statements: one person may tell the child, "Don't cry" while someone else may say, "It's okay to cry; it means we're sad, we miss Grandma and we love her very much."

Most people mean well, but sometimes they are simply misguided or uninformed. Help your child understand why different people feel differently about such matters; explain that what they learned and what they were taught as youngsters may be different from what you are teaching them now.

Acknowledge, too, that sometimes we simply don't know how we feel, and sometimes we don't feel anything at all. Our feelings may come later, and that's okay, too.

How can I get at what my children may be thinking and feeling?

- Offer physical closeness, comfort and reassurance.
- Look through photograph albums together.
- Talk about special memories and their relationship with the deceased.
- Read some of the wonderful and readily available children's books on grief.
- Acknowledge and normalize whatever your child may be feeling.
- Talk about your family's faith tradition about life, death and the afterlife.
- Be patient with repetitious questioning and be available to listen.

It's all right if you don't have all the answers. Sometimes there just aren't any satisfactory answers, but it's still important to discuss the questions. Children need parents to puzzle with them about such matters.

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