

# THE IMPORTANCE OF YOUTH AT FUNERALS

*A guide to help parents and caregivers understand the vital role memorialization plays in the lives of grieving children.*

*The death of a loved one is a painful and often overwhelming experience at any age. Amidst coping with their own grief, parents and caregivers are faced with talking to children about death and dying and frequently struggle with the question, “Should my child attend the funeral?”*

## DEBUNKING COMMON MYTHS

Parents may worry that a child is too young to care about or understand what happens during a funeral or why we have them. They may simply wonder if a child will remember the loved one. Parents may believe that funerals are only for adults because they may be too sad or traumatizing for children, perhaps they think children shouldn't see their parents cry.

It is important to understand that children feel the death of a loved one intensely and often feel forgotten if they are left out of the memorialization process. Exclusion can distress children and may lead them to create fear-based fantasies far scarier than what actually takes place. They may feel resentful for many years if they were not included in an important family event and didn't get to say good-bye to a loved one. They'll also miss out on receiving the comfort and support that connects friends and families during a funeral.

**So the answer is YES,** it is appropriate for children to attend a funeral. Saying good-bye to a loved one who died is never easy, but experts agree that children should be given the choice to attend the funeral and participate in the memorialization process in ways that feel meaningful and important to them.

## DISCUSSING DEATH AND FUNERALS

For children to make informed choices, parents and caregivers need to have open, direct and honest conversations with them and prepare them for the funeral service itself. The more open and honest adults are about these events, the more normalized and less scary these experiences become.

Children's reaction to death and the funeral experience will vary depending on age, nature of the relationship with the deceased, maturity level and ability to manage complex emotions.

Young children may be confused about where the deceased person has gone and when they are coming back. Teens may be concerned about their ability to control their emotions or how to interact with loved ones of the deceased. Others may be concerned because they simply do not know what to expect or what to do during a funeral or visitation.

Adult role modeling serves an important role for helping kids navigate their own way forward. Parents and caregivers have the most intimate knowledge of their child's demeanor, and it's crucial to understand and support young people on their unique levels as they go through the experience. Using simple, clear and concrete language is key when discussing terms children may find confusing or scary.

## DEATH

- Keep explanations honest and clear and avoid euphemisms (such as “lost,” “asleep” or “passed away”) that may confuse children.

- Simply explain that when someone dies, their body has stopped working and will not start working again. Clarify that a person who has died can no longer breathe, think, talk or feel pain, fear, cold, etc.

## FUNERALS

- A funeral (sometimes referred to as a memorial or celebration of life) is a ritual that helps families and friends express their deepest thoughts and feelings about the person who died.
- Explain that you will be having a funeral just for your loved one and that everyone will be together to share memories, express how much the person was loved and say a very special good-bye.

## BURIAL

- Explain that at the end of the funeral, the casket will be placed in a special car called a hearse and taken to the cemetery. There will be a very deep hole called a grave. The casket will be lowered into the grave and covered with earth.
- Eventually, grass will grow on top of it and soon a headstone will be put there to mark the place so people can remember where the casket was put into the ground.
- Let the child know that he or she will be able to visit the cemetery to think about and remember the loved one.

## CREMATION

- Use simple, clear and honest language, avoiding words like “fire” or “burn.”
- Tell children that cremation doesn’t hurt because after a person dies, they can’t feel pain. Explain that the person’s body is placed in a special box and then taken to a place called a crematory.
- Inside the crematory, it gets very, very hot, which changes the person’s body into soft, fine particles like white or gray sand, called cremated remains.

- The cremated remains are then placed in a special container, often called an urn.
- Discuss that the family might decide to keep the urn in a special place, bury the cremated remains in a cemetery or scatter them outdoors at a place that was important to the loved one or the family.

## YOUTH INVOLVEMENT IN MEMORIALIZATION

Simply attending the funeral will help children begin processing their grief. If possible, include youth of all ages in the planning of the funeral/memorial service to help them feel connected and involved.

Be sure they understand that at any point, they can change their mind about participation. Let their comfort level be a guide when sharing ideas about how they can express their feelings and honor their loved one.

Consider asking your funeral director or celebrant for suggestions on youth involvement or incorporate some of the following activities:

### PRIOR TO THE FUNERAL

- Draw a picture or write a letter to be placed into the casket or placed beside the urn.
- Select special photographs or items and help arrange a picture board or memorial table.
- Encourage the sharing of special stories and memories during the activity.

### DURING THE FUNERAL

- Greet guests, hand out memorial cards or direct people to the registration book.
- Start the ceremony by placing a flower on the casket or in front of a memorial portrait.
- During the ceremony, share a poem, reading or reflection; sing a song; or play an instrument.
- Hand out flowers after the service or graveside.

## WHEN CHILDREN CHOOSE NOT TO ATTEND A FUNERAL

*If children choose not to attend, let them know what they will be doing instead. Will they stay with a friend or family member? Will there be a babysitter? Will an overnight stay be involved?*

## PREPARING CHILDREN FOR FUNERAL ATTENDANCE

When young people make the decision to attend a funeral, it's best to explain in advance what they will see, what others may be doing and how they might feel. Even the smallest details will help them feel more comfortable with their decision and prepare for the event.

### EXPLAIN THE ORDER OF THE DAY

- Let them know what to expect and where the event or events will be held.
- Is there a visitation at the funeral home, a funeral ceremony at a church, a cemetery interment?
- Will a meal follow? Is the funeral taking place at someone's home or at another venue?

### GIVE THEM CHOICES AND CONTROL

- Make certain children feel empowered throughout the day and support their decisions.
- Let them help select their clothing and choose their favorite food for lunch. Do not force a hug or handshake.
- Assure them that at any point, they can change their mind about attending and participating. Assign a caregiver to leave with them, if necessary.
- If the body is present, give children control over how close they would like to get to the deceased, whether they would like to look at or touch the person and how long they want to stay in the room.

### TALK ABOUT WHAT PEOPLE WILL BE DOING

- Walk them through their role in the memorialization or explain what they can expect to do. Practice their role with them until they are comfortable.
- Explain that people may be waiting in a receiving line to greet the loved one's family or standing/sitting and talking.
- Talk about what will happen at the ceremony. Will it mirror a religious ceremony they may be familiar with? Who is the officiant or celebrant? Are there pallbearers and what do they do?
- Will there be music? Readings? Sitting or standing?

## DISCUSS WHO AND WHAT THEY MIGHT SEE

- Let them know who their "point person" will be. This individual should be a known and trusted person in the child's life and preferably someone who will not mind leaving the funeral if it becomes necessary.
- Will they see relatives and friends? Will they know many people? Will other children be in attendance? Show photographs to remind them of familiar faces, if possible.
- Talk about the celebration location. Will they see a hearse? A casket? An urn? As appropriate, show photographs of items and places they might see. Consider a visit to the funeral home or venue prior to the funeral.
- Be sure to let them know whether a body will be present or absent and explain in advance what they will see and when they will see it.
  - *When the body is present:* Let children know where the casket will be and whether it will be open, so they can see the person, or closed. Explain that a casket is a special box that their loved one's body will be in and clarify that the person may look like they are sleeping because their eyes will be closed and they will be lying down. Explain that when someone dies, it is not the same as sleeping when you are alive. Remind them that the person who died can no longer feel cold, hurt or fear. Talk about the color of the casket and what the loved one will be wearing. Describe what may be around the casket (flowers, memorial table, etc.)
  - *When the body is not present:* It is just as important to explain what the child will see when the body isn't present. Explain that there might be a portrait, and urn or a memorial table.

### TALK ABOUT EMOTIONS AND HOW PEOPLE MIGHT BE FEELING

- Prepare them for how they might feel by talking about sadness and grief. Let them know that people grieve differently and that their emotions might change throughout the day and that that's perfectly okay.
- Explain that people may be mourning, which is showing an outward expression of grief through an emotion such as crying, while others may be laughing and smiling.

## TAKE GRIEF BREAKS

- Youth tend to grieve differently from adults and often require “grief breaks” to allow them to manage their emotions in the face of extreme stress.
- Encourage children to engage with comforting items and activities (a favorite stuffed animal, blanket, books, puzzles) during grief breaks.
- Children learn through play, and fun and familiar activities can help them process complex feelings.

## NORMALIZE THE EXPERIENCE

- Children will be looking to parents and caregivers for support and guidance, and a child will notice if an adult is uncomfortable in their grief or during the funeral. Make sure your body language and tone mirror your words of assurance and normalcy.
- Remind children that crying is okay for both children and adults. Say, “It’s okay to be nervous or sad or scared today. We’re going to feel a lot of different emotions. I’m glad we’re here together to say our special good-byes. It’s very important, and it will help us feel much better.”

## ENCOURAGE QUESTIONS

- Encourage young people to ask questions and share what’s on their minds. It is not uncommon for a child to ask the same question again and again. Some questions may be direct and pointed, and it’s okay to not be able (or ready) to answer.
- Consider saying, “I’m glad you asked that question. I don’t know the answer either. Let’s find someone who might be able to answer it for us” or “It’s hard for me to answer that right now. Can we please talk about that at a different time soon?”

## CONTINUE TO CONNECT

Continue to offer children comfort, love and support in the days, weeks and months following a funeral. Ask them how they are feeling and invite them to share favorite memories of their loved one. Encourage questions and don’t forget to address any previous questions you may not have been able (or ready) to answer.

Please reach out to funeral service professionals and grief and bereavement experts in your area to learn about tools and resources that can help you address the unique needs of a grieving child.



We support funeral service in building meaningful relationships with the families and the communities it serves.

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*The Funeral Service Foundation created this guide in collaboration with funeral service professionals and grief and bereavement experts committed to helping families and caregivers understand the vital role memorialization plays in the lives of children grieving the death of a loved one.*

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