

Children and Funerals



There are many things to consider when preparing for the funeral and/or memorial service after the death of a loved one. Perhaps one of the biggest concerns is whether or not children should attend. If you assume that they will go to the funeral before they completely understand its purpose, then they may feel scared and/or uncomfortable. If you prohibit them from going, they may feel left out or resentful that they missed an opportunity to say goodbye. A lot of adults assume that children know what funerals are and why we have them, but funerals and cemeteries can be unfamiliar places for young children, particularly if they have not yet experienced a death. Therefore, before they even have the chance to decide whether or not to attend, it is important for children to understand what the experience will be like. Here are a few things to explain that will help them make an informed decision.

- **What is a funeral?** A funeral is a ceremony where people say goodbye to a person that died. If your children appear to be confused at this point, make sure they understand what it means for a person to be dead; that their bodies don't work anymore, that the person doesn't feel anything, etc. Sometimes funerals are at funeral homes, sometimes they are at places of worship, and sometimes there are memorial services at another type of community setting. Let the child know what type of service is planned, what the schedule is, and whether or not they will be expected to participate if they attend.
- **What will they see at the funeral?** If the body of their loved one will be at the funeral, explain that it will be in a big box called a *casket*. Sometimes the casket is open so you can see the person's body, and sometimes it is closed. If the deceased is to be buried, let them know there will be a big hole in the ground at the cemetery where the casket will be lowered. If the person is cremated, be prepared to explain that process as well.
- **Who will be at the funeral?** Friends and family members will be at the funeral. A lot of people will probably be crying, but let your child know that if they don't want to cry that is okay. There will also be a person called a funeral director, who is in charge of the services and taking care of the body.
- **What else?** Your children may have a lot of questions about the funeral. If you don't think you can answer them, talk to the funeral director and see if they would be willing to talk to your children. It is important to keep the lines of communication open so that your children know they can come to you with questions or concerns.

Although talking about a death with a child is never easy, the important thing to remember is to be honest and keep explanations simple. Children don't often need extensive descriptions of what is going on, they just don't want to be left completely in the dark. If your children do not want to attend the funeral, try offering an alternative so that they can still have a chance to say goodbye. One thing that many families do is to offer the children a chance to help with the funeral preparations. This can include:

- Picking out the casket or urn.
- Placing a note, drawing, special object or memento in the casket.
- Selecting clothing and jewelry for the deceased to wear.
- Selecting songs, music, and/or readings for the service.
- Selecting photos to be displayed at the service.
- If the body is to be seen at the services, some families have found it helpful to have the children have a private viewing before the services so that they can ask any questions and have time as a family with the body to say goodbye.





While talking about a funeral can be hard, it also can bring you and your family one step closer to helping your children accept the reality of the death, which is an important step in the grief journey.

Further Reading:

- *Tell Me, Papa* by Joy & Dr. Marvin Johnson

References:

- Gaffney, D. (n.d.). SHARING YOUR GRIEF - Including Your Children in Memorial Services. Retrieved July 20, 2015, from [http://www.nationalallianceforgrievingchildren.org/sites/default/files/spiritweb/Sharing Your Grief-Including Children.pdf](http://www.nationalallianceforgrievingchildren.org/sites/default/files/spiritweb/Sharing%20Your%20Grief-Including%20Children.pdf)
- Tousley, M. (n.d.). Explaining the Funeral to Your Children. Retrieved July 20, 2015, from <http://www.griefhealing.com/column-explaining-the-funeral-to-your-children.htm>

