

Helping Children at a Funeral



Our world revolves around children, doesn't it? Christmas and Easter and birthdays and national holidays - all keep children 'in the loop' and they, by osmosis, seem to know how to act and respond and feel. But funerals are an adult affair. There is often nothing for children. In fact, many parents don't allow their children to attend funerals nor even visit the lost loved one at the funeral home. They feel it will be too upsetting for them or leave them with bad memories.

Yes, funerals can be painful, but they are important to survivors of any age:

- They help acknowledge that someone dear to them has died.
- They offer a structure for expressing grief and mourning.
- They provide a time for honoring and remembering and affirming life.
- They initiate inner considerations of the 'meaning of life' in religious or philosophical ways.

Start with your children by explaining what to expect from a funeral - before, during and after. Allow their questions even though your answers may be a bit beyond their understanding.

If the body is to be viewed, it is important to prepare them for what they will see in the gathering room. If possible, take them before other guests arrive for a more intimate, quiet experience. If the body has been or will be cremated, explain that process and the reasons for it. Tell them that crying or tears - even with adults - are common and not to be feared when they see people they know and love in distress.

Tell them why we have funerals - as a time for people to express their sadness and to honor the person they loved.

Expressing the spiritual side of death and what you believe happens after a person dies is appropriate. Children have a difficult time with abstractions, so try to talk in concrete terms as much as possible.

If appropriate and if he or she would like to, allow the child to take part in the funeral service - reading a poem or lighting a candle or laying a flower on the casket. This affirms the legitimacy of their feelings.

Children, unlike adults, need to express their grief in doses. Don't be alarmed if they are sad one minute and want to play a video game the next. Allow them to grieve as their spirits guide them.

Physical closeness is important. They need to know they are not alone in this experience. Holding hands, hugging, touching is always helpful.

Children don't know the meaning of so many of the uniquely 'funeral' words. Try to define some of these for them. It will prevent a lot of confusion.

- **Ashes** (*also "cremains"*): What is left of a dead body after cremation. Looks like ashes from a fire.
- **Burial**: Placing the body (which is inside a casket) into the ground.
- **Casket**: A special box for burying a dead body.
- **Cemetery**: A place where many dead bodies are buried.
- **Cremation**: Putting the dead body into a room with lots of heat until it turns into ashes.
- **Dead**: When a person's body stops working. It doesn't see, hear, feel, eat, breathe, etc. anymore.
- **Funeral**: A time when friends and families get together to say goodbye and remember the person who died.
- **Funeral home**: A place where bodies are kept until they are buried.
- **Grave**: The hole in the ground where the body is buried at the cemetery.
- **Hearse**: The special car that takes the dead body in the casket to the grave at the cemetery.
- **Obituary**: A short article in the paper that tells about the person who died.
- **Pallbearer**: The people who help carry the casket at the funeral.
- **Viewing**: The time when people can see the body of the person who died.

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