

Children and Funerals

Should children go to funerals?

Although children should never be forced to go to a funeral it is important to remember that funerals are a family occasion and children are part of the family. When children are not given the opportunity to say whether or not they would like to go, they may feel angry, isolated and rejected.

Adults may feel that it would be too painful for children to attend a funeral and see people crying. In attempting to protect children from the sadness, you may in fact take away their chance to say goodbye. This can make it harder for children to understand what has really happened and to begin the grieving process. You may not want your children to see you distressed but your sadness is an acknowledgement of a shared loss.

There is no right or wrong age for children to attend a funeral. For toddlers and babies you can use your own judgement about how able they would be to sit in a formal setting.

If you do want to take children under the age of 3 years who are not used to sitting still for long periods, it is helpful to have an adult who will look after them if they become very restless or distressed. This is a good idea even for older children who may only want to sit through part of the service. They may feel less anxious about going if they know it is an option to leave part way through.

Funerals can be a time to share happy memories about someone who has died and this can be helpful to give children a perspective about the person's life, as well as death.

Explaining funerals

In accordance with the child's age, you can help them make an informed choice about whether or not to attend the funeral. Most children will know very little about what a funeral is and need to be given information to help them decide. The following suggestions may be helpful:

- One of the nicest things about being a person is that we are able to feel love for another person. This doesn't end when the person dies. Funerals can help us to cry and say our goodbyes to someone we love. They are a chance to spend time with other people who also feel sad like you and helps you understand how much others care too. Lots of different people may come to the funeral such as other relatives and friends who will also want to say goodbye.

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- When a person dies they don't need their bodies and cannot feel pain anymore.
- After someone dies we put their body in a special box called a coffin. The coffin is then buried in the ground. Something called a gravestone may be put on top of the ground where the coffin is buried with special words on it. The grave is a place you can go and remember your special person and lots of people may leave flowers there to show they are thinking about them.

OR

- Some people may be taken to a crematorium where the coffin is burned and the body becomes ashes which are put in a small container. These can be scattered in a place such as a garden, woodland or somewhere that was special to the person who died.

These are just suggestions; it is important to give children as much information as they are comfortable with. Children have differing personalities: some will ask lots of questions and want very detailed information, others will prefer less. Be guided by their questions and the way in which they react when you explain things to them.

Involving children in the funeral

The level of participation children have in funeral arrangements will depend on their age and ability. Children may want to contribute to what happens at the funeral, for example they might want to write a message or draw a picture. They might like to make suggestions about any music that is played. Older children might like to write something and read it themselves or have an adult read it on their behalf.

What if I do not want them to attend

If children do not attend either because you do not wish them to or they do not want to, there are still things you can do to make them part of the day. Some children will want to stick to their usual routine and go to school, whilst for others it may be important that they stay with someone they can talk to if they want to. When the funeral has finished, talk to them about what happened. If somebody has read out a poem, you could give them a copy. Another idea might be to take photographs of the flowers. Take them to the place where the ashes or body are and let them say their goodbyes in private with you. There are many ways children can be involved even if they don't attend.