

Funerals and cremations



There will be many factors which influence the decisions around organising a funeral for a loved one and how to broach the subject with your child is just one consideration. You may have particular cultural and / or religious beliefs within your family leading to specific practices that form the framework for saying goodbye to a loved one. For example, some traditions stipulate an early funeral; some favour cremation; whilst others place a high importance on the opportunity for people to view the body. Your loved one's funeral may also include their beliefs and wishes too.

It could be that you are having to explain all of this to your child as events unfold and you may wish you had a little more time to help prepare them. It might seem simpler and kinder to exclude them from proceedings, particularly if they are quite young, however evidence suggests that most children appreciate some level of involvement. Remember it is important that how and what you tell your child fits your beliefs and feels right for you.

Below are some general principles and points to consider to help you negotiate this tricky path.

• Information

A bereavement can cause distress in those caring for a child and the child will pick up on this. Providing your child with basic information about what is happening can reduce their anxiety at seeing you distressed or knowing something is wrong.

Use simple, clear language to explain that their loved one has died. Avoid terms such as 'gone to sleep', 'passed' and 'lost' as these can cause confusion and fear. The concept that death is permanent and irreversible can be difficult for younger children to grasp but it is an important to support their understanding of this, otherwise the idea of a burial or cremation might seem very frightening.

Talk to your child about the family's plans to 'say goodbye' to their loved one. Describe the course of events which are likely to take place over the next few days or weeks. If a funeral or cremation is planned, talk to them about the day and what it will involve. It may be appropriate to visit the venue in advance or perhaps look at photos on the organisation's website.

Providing your child with as much age-appropriate information as possible will help them feel more confident. Potential topics to address include: the opportunity to 'say goodbye'; what a burial or cremation involves; where their loved one's body is currently; how it will get to the venue; what the venue looks like; why people send flowers; the details of any planned service.

• Choice

Faced with a bereavement, many adults worry their child may be too young to attend the funeral. Evidence suggests that most children can make a choice about whether or not they wish to attend once they have a good understanding of what might happen and being offered this choice can help their grieving process. Adults and older children who were bereaved at a very young age, often report feeling comforted by the knowledge they attended the funeral of a significant family member even if they don't remember it.

It is important to make your child aware that you and others may get upset, reassuring them that you will be ok. If practical, you may wish to offer them choice about attending parts of the day only.

If you decide it is not appropriate for your child to attend the funeral for whatever reason or your child decides they do not want to attend, there are still ways they can be involved. It may be they can watch it at home with a supportive adult or perhaps they can help choose a song or draw or write something that can be included in the funeral or placed in the coffin. Alternatively, there may be a gathering they could attend or perhaps a ritual could be held at home.

Depending on whether a burial or cremation took place, your child may be able to visit the grave, view the urn or take part in any scattering of ashes in the future.

• Reassurance

Following a bereavement, children can find themselves caught up in a new and unfamiliar situation they may find difficult to grasp and trying to understand strong emotions in themselves and those around them. Life can feel out of control and children need reassurance that whilst this is a difficult time for all involved, they are still safe and loved.

They may need extra hugs, cuddles and conversations; and keeping consistent boundaries and familiar routines can restore some sense of safety for children. Additionally, the information you provide about what's happened and the choices offered to them around marking the death of their loved one can help them to make sense of what is happening to their family.

Younger children may ask particular questions about the funeral, burial or cremation which can be hard to hear and sometimes answer. Try to remember that answering these questions is a form of reassurance and creating an atmosphere in which talking about their loved one and what has happened to them is helping your child process their grief.

• Support - for you and your child

If you are worried about supporting your child whilst managing your own emotions, consider who might be able to support you in this. You could involve your child in choosing who might sit with them at home whilst a funeral takes place or sit next to them during the proceedings. Explain who will take them out if they want to leave and that you will be staying behind.

Don't worry about your child seeing you upset, this gives permission for them to express their emotions too and you can reassure them that whilst you are sad, you will be ok.

We acknowledge and respect that some cultures conduct the funeral as soon as possible after the death, and have other important traditions following the funeral, this will all influence how you can and choose to explain what will happen. Think about how your day will be, breaking it down will help you find the best way to explain what will happen and when to your child. Knowing what to expect and what will happen, will help your child be as prepared as possible.

Why are these things important?

The concept of Continuing Bonds

Historically, many people believed that when a loved one died, we needed to do our best to sever our relationship with them and leave it in the past. However, more recent research has shown that we all, including children naturally seek to continue a bond with our loved ones through things like keeping objects that belonged to them; celebrating certain characteristics and interests of their loved one and wanting to reach out to them, feel close and remember them. As part of this research, it has been shown that children seek an answer to the question, 'Where is my loved one now when I think of them?' This could be in a grave, in heaven, in their heart, mind or in their memory. It needs to be something that makes sense to them and resonates with their connection to their loved one.

For a child, their wider family can support them in developing helpful and healthy continuing bonds with their loved one, whilst they as adults also do the same. Each will be an expression of the unique relationship that individual had with the deceased.

Vickio (1999) describes 5 types of 'Continuing Bonds' you or your child might choose to develop:

- Recognizing how the deceased has left an imprint on our lives
- Deriving a sense of meaning from the life of the deceased
- Using objects that symbolically link us to the deceased
- Identifying ceremonial opportunities to include the deceased in our lives
- Continuing our connection by reviewing the deceased's life story

Having an appropriate level of involvement in the funeral or cremation can allow opportunities for your child to feel included, to hear stories about their loved one, to be with people who also loved them and are grieving, and to recognise the impact their loved one had on the lives of others and themselves. This facilitates healthy continuing bonds. It can also help your child begin to make sense of their grief and provides understanding that others are grieving too. It also helps them to feel reassured and to see who else is there to support them. This in turn can help you too.

Further support

This leaflet is written to support our two primary publications in the Little Gem series:

- Supporting a child when someone they love has died / Someone I love has died
- Someone significant has died – handling grief as a young person

Our other specialist leaflets include:

- Talking about and understanding death
- Supporting a child bereaved by murder
- Supporting a child bereaved by suicide
- Telling a child a friend has died
- Building resilience following a bereavement
- Viewing a body with a child

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