

Viewing a body with a child



Viewing a body is a very personal choice which may be influenced by both individual and cultural beliefs and practices. A decision over whether or not to allow your child to view the body of their loved one can be hard to make, especially if you are grieving too.

Many families choose not to take up the option of viewing the body at all, in which case the children within the family may not be aware this is a possibility and so don't feel they are missing out. However, it can be more difficult if some members of the wider family choose to view the body and others hold a different view, your child may wonder why or find this confusing. Some children may struggle if there is a general expectation that viewing the body is something everyone in the family does, but they feel differently.

You may have strong feelings about the appropriateness of your child viewing the body or have children of differing ages and worry it will be too upsetting for one or more of your children. However, it is not always a negative experience. Depending on the circumstances of the bereavement, it can sometimes bring peace of mind, particularly if the death was connected to a traumatic event. Some people find viewing the body can help them to fully accept the death.

It is important to involve your child in this decision and talk it through with them at length, particularly if they have strong feelings either way, or you disagree with their view. Armed with relevant and age-appropriate information, many children are able to make an informed choice about what is right for them. It is not uncommon for adults to remember being made to or not allowed to attend a viewing as a child, so listening to your child's wishes and sharing your reasons can help your child accept a decision they do not agree with.

Your child's choice may surprise you and may be different from other members of the family, if this the case offer reassurance that whatever they decide must be right for them.

If gathering around the body forms an important cultural practice in your family, supporting your child to be present in the building whilst others spend time with the body can also be important. Ensure your child does not feel pressured or feel like there is an expectation to approach the body themselves. Let them know they can change their mind at any point, leave at any time, or look from a distance, even if this is from the doorway.

If others have decided to view the body, a child may wish to go along but leave making their decision to the last moment. If they decide not to view the body, reassure your child that it does not mean they do not love the person or do not care. We all grieve differently and express our grief in different ways. There may be another way that is meaningful for you and your child to spend time saying goodbye especially if others are viewing the body, perhaps spend time looking at a favourite photograph.

Children can get anxious about what happens to a person's body when they die. They may have questions around where the body is, who is taking care of it and what it will look like. Talking these through will give you the chance to answer these questions and give them additional reassurance around how the body will be lying in the coffin, what clothes they will be wearing etc. If you are unsure, you may find it helpful to talk this through with the funeral director or other appropriate person first. If the body's appearance is not suitable for viewing, it may be the coffin lid could stay on, or the body could be fully covered during your child's visit.

You may find that your child does not voice their feelings, emotions or any questions at the time of viewing a body. It is not uncommon for a child to need some time to think about their experience before expressing how they feel. Again, you may find your child's reaction differs from your prior expectations and possibly from your own experience. If a child has made an active choice to view a body and has been given information and time to prepare for what to expect, they can find it a helpful opportunity to say goodbye, perhaps using the time to say something, or share a letter, picture or poem with their loved one.

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:

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

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