

# **PREPARING CHILDREN FOR FUNERALS AND MEMORIALS**

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Family rituals following a death are significant events in an individual's life, and children are no exception. Historically in North America it was the norm for children to be included not only at the bedside of the dying, but also in funeral and memorial rituals. Now, however it is common for many adults to worry that including children in such events will be "too hard" or "traumatic" for them. Families who do choose to include their youngest members at their ceremonies following a death often wonder how to best prepare and support them. In this article we will address these concerns as well as other frequently asked questions on the topic.

## **Should I bring the kids?**

"Should we bring children to the service?" is something many parents wonder about. The vast majority of children benefit from being included in funerals and memorials as long as they are well prepared and emotionally supported by the adults in their lives. In the Harvard Child Bereavement Study, which focused on children who experienced the death of a parent, it was found that participation in the funeral "...did not lead to later behavioral/emotional difficulties: on the contrary, most children felt positive about their involvement." (Warden, 1996). Current literature on the topic continues to support including children in funeral and memorial rituals.

As long as they are prepared for the event and surrounded by an atmosphere of love and emotional support, there can be many benefits for children who attend funerals and other death rituals. These benefits can include:

- Helping children to acknowledge and understand the reality of the death.
- Having the opportunity to honor and share memories of the person who died.
- Observing family and friends supporting one another, and directly receiving support from the community.
- Gaining an understanding that a life can be grieved and celebrated at the same time.
- Feeling included, as opposed to excluded, in this significant event in their lives.
- Being relieved of some of the fear and stigma around death and death rituals. When left to their own imagination children often imagine these events to be far scarier than they actually are.
- Having their own feelings of grief and loss validated.

## **How old should children be in order to attend events such as visitations, funerals, memorials, or burials?**

No child is too young to attend these events as long as they are well prepared and supported.

## How can I prepare a child for the visitation, funeral, or burial?

You can best prepare children for the event by letting them know in as much detail as possible about what they will experience. Explaining the service in age appropriate terms can help alleviate some of the anxiety that comes from not knowing what to expect. Provide as many details as you can about what they will see, hear, smell and even feel (such as the body) at the service. Tell them about any rules that they will have to follow, such as needing to be quiet at certain points during the event. As with any other aspect of funerals and death, concrete descriptions of what will happen rather than euphemisms are the most helpful:

*“A funeral is when family and friends come together to share feelings for the person who died such as thank-you, I love you, and goodbye. We remember the life of the person who died and share stories, laughter and tears. We receive comfort and support by being with the people who care about us.”*

You can explain to the child that there may be music, people may tell stories and there may be times of silence. Prepare children to see others expressing their feelings, such as crying and laughing.

*“You may see many people showing a lot of different feelings. They may be laughing, they may be crying and any and all of those feelings are okay. Adults cry too and that’s healthy. It can help to let our feelings out. But it’s also okay if you don’t cry. People show their feelings in different ways.”*

Let children know that they may feel a wide range of feelings as well.

*“You may feel many different feelings at the same time. This can be confusing. And sometimes when we have a lot of different feelings at the same time the feelings can come out as a big “giggle burst”.*

Also let kids know that sometimes during the funeral we may not feel anything at all, and that’s okay. Sometimes our feelings come weeks or months later.

Many children are confused by the common saying of “I’m sorry” or “I’m sorry for your loss” which they are likely to hear both directly to them and indirectly to others in the days and weeks following a death. Some children confuse this with an apology and wonder “Did all these people cause the death in some way?” or “Why is that person apologizing when he didn’t do anything to cause the death?” Others simply feel unsure of how to respond. Prepare kids for the fact that they are likely to hear this from people not only at the ceremonies around the death, but also in their day-to-day life as well. Let them know it is a common saying when someone dies, and it doesn’t mean that the person is apologizing for doing something wrong. Provide them with language they can use to respond which can be as simple as “Thank you” so they are not left trying to figure out what to say in the moment.

Children thrive on knowing what to expect. They need to know WHO will be there, WHAT will happen, WHERE the service will take place and WHEN and WHY it's happening.

### **How do I explain the body?**

Children are naturally curious about what happens to a body after death. Begin this part of the conversation by making sure the child understands that the body of the person who died does not work anymore and will never work again.

*“Grandpa’s body has died which means it has stopped working and will never work again. When a body dies it doesn’t feel anything anymore. So grandpa’s body does not feel pain, cold, heat, hunger, etc.”*

Also, when talking about “the body” with a child, always explain that the body has a head. Sometimes when we use the word “body”, children interpret it as being the area from the neck down and believe that the body that is being talked about does not have a head.

Once the child understands that the body (including head) is no longer working at all, let them know how the body will be involved in the event. For example:

*“We put grandpa’s body in a special box called a casket. You will see the casket at his funeral. People will carry it in and out of his funeral.”*

### **Is it okay for the child to view the body of someone who has died?**

Yes. Children benefit from being given the option to view the body (when possible) one last time. Death is such an abstract concept for children, particularly young ones, and viewing a body that has died in a safe and supportive environment can actually help children understand the concept. In addition, kids will often imagine the body to look far scarier than the reality.

If the body of the person who died will be present at the event, explain clearly to children that this is the last time they will be with the person’s body, whether they see the body or not.

Even if a casket is closed, at the request of immediate family most funeral homes are more than willing to arrange for a private viewing of the person’s body prior or following a funeral or visitation.

If the child does want to view the body and has the opportunity to do so, prepare them for what they are likely to see, such as the fact that the person’s body may look different than the child is used to. For example the skin may be lighter, and the body may have a lot of make-up on.

Let children know that even if they aren't able to see the person's legs, as they are often covered, their legs are there.

If the child wants to view the person's body but their parent or caregiver does not, then arrange for someone else to view the body with the child, but make sure it is an adult with whom the child feels comfortable.

Prior to a visitation or funeral, always remember to address with kids whether or not the body will be present, so they are not caught off guard by the presence or absence of the body.

### **What if my child does not want to view the body?**

That is absolutely okay. Never force a child of any age to view a body if they do not want to.

If the child does not want to view the body, respect that and make arrangements for the child to be present at the event without viewing the body.

If a child is uncertain about whether they want to view a body, it can help to have an adult take a photo of the person's body so the child has the option to view the body at a later time. Or if the child is interested, the child can look at the photo prior to making a final decision whether to view the body. Seeing a photo of the body (or visitation room) helps kids know what to expect and some children decide that they do want to view the body once they have seen a picture. Seeing a photo is often reassuring for children as they realize that the reality of what the body looks like is less scary than what they were imagining.

### **What if kids want to touch the body?**

When viewing the body is an option, let children know that they are welcome to touch the body. Adults should also feel welcome to touch the person's body.

Prepare children by letting them know ahead of time that if they want to touch the body it will feel hard and cold. Remind them that because the person is dead, they will not be breathing so the chest will not rise and fall. There may be lots of make-up on the body that may come off a little bit when you touch them. If needed, the funeral home can provide guidance if the child wishes to touch the person in the casket. For some children, touching the body may simply be a curiosity, and for others it can be a way to say goodbye. You can check with the funeral home, but in almost all cases, it is okay for the body to be kissed, the hands to be held, the hair to be stroked, and so forth.

*"If you want to, you will be able to see grandpa's body in the casket. You may want to touch his body and if you do, that's okay. It is safe to touch him or kiss him. He will probably feel cold and his skin may feel not as soft as usual. He may look like*

*he is sleeping, but he is not sleeping. He can never wake up because his body has died. You may not be able to see his legs, because often they are covered when someone is in a casket. But even if you don't see them they are there."*

If the visitation and/or funeral service is the last chance for the child to see and touch the body of the person who died, let them know this.

### **How do I explain cremation?**

Many adults find it particularly challenging to talk about cremation with children. Fortunately children tend to be much more comfortable with the topic. Start this conversation by making sure that the child has a good understanding about the fact that when someone dies their body does not work and does NOT FEEL anything anymore. Emphasize that because the person is dead, their body will not feel anything at all during cremation – a dead body cannot feel heat or pain.

Let the child know that the body is placed in a special little room that gets very, very hot. The room gets so hot that it makes the body break down into very fine, soft pieces called ashes. The ashes are then usually put in a small container called an urn. The urn may be buried in the ground, kept at home or sometimes scattered in a beautiful place that meant something to the person who died.

When explaining cremation, try to avoid using the word “burned” as this can easily be misinterpreted as though the body feels the process.

If the child requests to see the ashes allow them to do so.

### **How do I explain burial to a child?**

Let the child know that the special box which holds the body, called a “casket”, will be closed at the cemetery. At the burial the casket will be lowered into the ground. Remember to reassure them that the person in the casket cannot feel anything anymore, so it does not hurt them at all.

If the person has been cremated then explain to the child that at the burial the urn will be buried in the ground.

Let children know that in the future, they can come back to the cemetery and spend time where the body was buried to remember the person there, and to take care of the spot where their body is buried.

Let children know who will put the dirt on top of the casket or urn once it is in the ground, as sometimes this is done by the people at the burial while other times it's done by the people who work at the cemetery once everyone leaves. For example:

*“Grandpa’s dead body will be in the casket. The casket will be put in a big hole. Then people will put dirt on top of the casket to cover it and to bury it in the ground. Grandpa won’t feel scared going into the ground because remember what I said earlier, once a body dies it does not feel anything. The dead body does not feel scared or cold or lonely.”*

Also let them know if anyone will be speaking at the burial. Again, prepare them for the emotions they are likely to witness around them.

### **How can the funeral home help support my child?**

Work with the funeral home to develop a plan on how to make your child comfortable. For example, you can ask the funeral home to create a children’s area during the visitation and/or service with toys and crafts such as crayons and paper.

### **What if a child doesn’t want to go to the funeral?**

Encourage, but don’t force, children to attend a funeral. If a child really doesn’t want to attend it may be that they are scared of some aspect of the funeral or their reaction to it. Take time to explore the reasons behind their reluctance to attend. Do your best to help alleviate any guilt about not attending.

If a child doesn’t attend the funeral, take some photos (or request that someone else does so) to enable the child to look at them at a later date if they want to. Also, let the child know that they are welcome to ask you questions about the event when you return home.

A child who does not attend the funeral or memorial service should be offered an alternative ceremony, such as a ceremony done at home or a visit to the cemetery or some other place of significance at a later date.

If the child decides to go to school on the day of the service, let the teacher know that this may be a difficult day for them and they may need some extra emotional support.

### **What happens if a child needs a break from the service, visitation, or burial?**

At these events it is ideal to set young children up with a buddy who can take them out of the area for a break if they need it. The buddy should be someone who the child feels comfortable with, such as a well-know babysitter or older friend or relative. The buddy should also be someone who isn’t particularly close to the person who died, so it is easy for them to miss part of the event. Some kids find it difficult to tell someone that they need a break, so it helps to set up a signal (such as the child giving a thumb up, or tugging on his/her ear) in advance that can be used to let the buddy know that they need

a break from what's happening. At a funeral home or someone's house there are often other rooms where the child and buddy can go for a break, while at a cemetery the buddy and child can just go for a walk.

### **Should children participate in the funeral or memorial service?**

Children benefit from being invited to take part in funerals, memorials, and burial services as it allows them to feel included and empowers them. This can help diminish some of their fears during a time when they may be feeling very helpless. Depending on age, interest and ability, the level of participation can vary greatly. You can start by asking the child for their ideas as they may surprise you and create something very unique and meaningful to them.

Many children appreciate being given the opportunity to say something or (for older children) read something at the funeral or memorial. Some children feel more comfortable writing or dictating a letter that someone else then reads out for them.

Children should be asked if there is anything they would like to put in the casket to be buried or cremated with the body of the person who died. Many children find comfort in doing this and some examples of what can be included are a small gift or memento, a drawing or letter, a stuffed toy, or a photo.

Some families invite children to decorate the casket with stickers, and some families intentionally choose simple wood caskets which can be drawn/written on by children and adults alike.

Other simple ideas for participation can include helping to pick out the clothes that the person will be buried or cremated in, lighting a candle, choosing photographs and/or music for the service, or drawing something for display.

### **What are some additional ideas of how a child can participate in the visitation or service?**

- **Create a Memory Table**
  - Have children gather things that remind them of the person who died. For example, something the person loved, something with sentimental value, photos, or favorite items. Bring these to the funeral home to place on a memory table. You may want to use labels that explain the significance. Later, you can set up a small memorial table at home.
- **Make a Collage**
  - Make a picture collage of the loved one and the family. This can be done with just photos or it can also include magazine pictures, scrapbooking accessories and other items. It can be brought to the funeral home and put

on display, and then brought home for the child to keep.

- **Engage in a “Senses” Memory Activity**
  - Ask children to use their five senses to think about what the person was known for: what sounds, smells, sights and tastes are reminders of them? Use those associations to do something creative at the funeral or memorial such as bringing the person’s favorite candies for people to eat, burning a scented candle or wearing a perfume the person loved. Just make sure to check-in with the funeral home/memorial site about what you plan to bring just in case they have any restrictions.
  
- **Place Mementos in the Casket or by the Urn**
  - Children can be encouraged to draw pictures, place notes, letters, stuffed toys or other sentimental items in the casket or by the urn. If children do choose to leave a memento in the casket following the event make sure they understand that they won’t get it back.
  
- **Collect Memories and Stories**
  - Children can draw a design or border on a piece of paper which can then be photocopied. The papers can be handed out at the visitation or funeral, or placed in a certain area, and those attending the event can be invited to write down a favorite memory or story of the person who died. Alternatively they can write a message to the person who died. Afterwards, these can be given to the family or placed in the casket. Another option involves having a blank Bristol Board where people can stick notes with messages and /or memories. Similarly, children can help create and design a book where people can write their memories of the person who died.
  
- **Select Music**
  - Many children appreciate being able to help select music for the funeral or memorial. They may choose something that is meaningful to them or to the person who died. Some children even wish to sing a song or play an instrument as part of their tribute to the person who died.
  
- **Act as a Pallbearer**
  - If there is going to be a casket present, children may wish to play an active part in the moving of the casket by being pallbearers. If a child is too small to help move the casket, he or she can be given the title of “honorary pallbearer” and walk in front of, behind, or next to the casket. Older children and young adults may be able to act as full pallbearers. A funeral director can help organize this.
  
- **Speak at the Service**
  - Ask children if they would like to speak, read something, or have their words shared at the service. If a child’s preference is not to speak, give



them the option to write or dictate something that can be read by someone else. If a child is unsure about what to say or share, suggest creating a list of their favorite things about the person who died, sharing a favorite memory, or writing a letter to the person who died. Alternatively some children prefer to pick out a poem or other reading that either they read or someone else reads.

- **Engage in “Letting Go” Rituals**

- Some children find it helpful to take part in a ritual where there is a physical “letting go” that symbolizes their experience of letting go of their ability to be in physical contact with the person who died. Examples include releasing balloons with messages or butterflies.

- **Decorate the Grave**

- After the burial of a casket or an urn, children can be invited to visit and decorate the grave. They might wish to bring flowers, notes, rocks, or other objects and offerings. Find out from the cemetery office as to whether there are any restrictions as to which items can be left at a grave site.

## **How do I Support my Child Following the Funeral or Memorial Events?**

After the services, ask the children if they have any questions about what they saw and experienced. Explore whether there were any aspects of the events that were confusing or upsetting to them. They may have seen or heard something that they were not expecting. Let them know that their questions are always welcome and that there are no bad questions. Answer their questions simply, honestly and in an age appropriate way. If you don't know the answer to their question, be honest and let them know this. It's okay to say “I don't know” or “I'm not sure but would you like me to try and find an answer to that?”

Explore with children what was said to them during the event. They may have experienced someone saying things such as “be strong/brave” or “you need to support your father” or “you are the man of the house now”. If this has happened, talk to them about the fact that being strong and brave includes allowing themselves to feel all of their feelings, and expressing those feelings in various ways including (if it comes naturally to the child) tears. Reassure children that it is not their job to take care of the adults in their life, even when a parent has died.

When supporting your children, try not to hide your feelings from them. Instead, model healthy grief for them and let them know that even though you may have all kinds of big feelings right now, these feelings are natural and healthy. Reassure children that even though you are grieving you are okay and able to take care of them. Let them know that grief can be done together as a family, and that feelings benefit from being expressed, as opposed to suppressed.

When dealing with the death of someone who they care about, children benefit from honesty, inclusion, and from being in an environment where they can safely express their feelings and ask any of the questions that they have. Receiving such support goes a long way towards helping a child integrate the death of someone they care about into their life in the healthiest way possible.

## Child Friendly Glossary

**Note:** It can be helpful for children to see photos of the items described below. You can search items on the internet and then show these photos to the child such as: Funeral home, casket, urn, grave, hearse, etc. Another idea is to print the photos and have the child make a collage, while you explain and discuss each item.

*Casket:* A special box made of wood or metal with handles and a top that can be opened or closed. Inside it looks somewhat like a bed. There is often a pillow. The body (including the head) of the person who died goes into the casket.

*Cremation:* The dead body is placed in a special little room that gets very, very hot. The room gets so hot that it makes the body into very small pieces called ashes. Being cremated does not hurt because the dead body cannot feel anything.

*Embalming:* This involves chemicals being put inside the body of the person who died to protect their body so it can be kept until it is buried or cremated.

*Eulogy:* Often at a funeral or memorial, one (or more) people will talk to the whole group about the person who died. This is called a eulogy. It is a special speech made about the person who died, and usually includes memories about the person.

*Funeral Home:* A building where peoples' bodies are taken care of after they die. The funeral home will have different rooms with furniture in them for people to visit with each other. Often these rooms look like a living room. The funeral home is also where people often go to visit with the body of someone who died. Sometimes there are places to get food and drinks at the funeral home. Some funeral homes have a chapel, which looks like the inside of a church or synagogue, where a funeral service happens.

*Funeral Director:* A person whose job it is to look after the body of the person who died. They will pick up the person's body from where they died, bathe them, dress them and place them in the casket. The funeral director also helps to organize visitations, funerals, cremations, and burials. A funeral director is a good person to ask questions to about death and funerals.

*Grief:* The different feelings people have when someone is dying or has died. This can include feelings of anger, sadness, relief, confusion, guilt, loneliness, and many more. When we feel grief we may also have feelings of joy, happiness, and relief, and that is completely natural and healthy.

*Grave:* A hole that has been dug into the ground where the casket or urn will be placed. The casket or urn is then covered by dirt.

*Hearse:* A special car that carries the casket. The body of the person who died is in the casket.

*Headstone:* A stone that is placed at the grave to show where the casket or urn is buried. It usually has the person's name, birthday, and date of death. Sometimes the headstone may even have a photo, picture, or poem on it.

*Procession:* The line of cars that drive to the cemetery where people who have died are buried.

*Reception:* A time after the funeral/memorial service for people to be together and share stories and memories of the person who died. There are usually food and drinks at the reception.

*Shiva:* A week-long period of time where close family members and friends come together to grieve following a death. Many families hold Shiva for less than 7 days. Shiva is often held in someone's home and it usually starts right after the funeral.

*Urn:* A special container that holds the ashes after the dead body has been cremated.

*Viewing/Visitation:* A time when people come together to be with the body of the person who died. The body is usually in a casket, and the casket may be open (so we can see the body) or it may be closed.

## Reference

Worden, J.W. (1996). *Children and Grief: When a Parent Dies*. The Guilford Press: New York.

## **About the Authors**

Michelle Methven is a mom whose entire world shifted in June 2011 when her two-year old daughter was diagnosed with an aggressive brain tumor and given just months to live. Michelle and her wife Aimee were determined that if they "couldn't add days to her life, they would add life to her days" and learned the true meaning of living like there is no tomorrow. When Stella died, the "magical" funeral, Michelle and her family experienced inspired her to enter the profession so that she could make a difference in the lives of others, the way the funeral directors made a difference for her. Since Stella's death, Michelle has teamed up with the life-cycle celebrant and funeral director who helped plan Stella's service and spoken to many groups about what it truly takes to celebrate life in the face of such a devastating loss.

Andrea Warnick is an educator, grief counsellor, nurse, and thanatologist. She specializes in ensuring that adults, children and youth have access to caring and informed support when experiencing the serious illness, dying, or death of someone close to them. She has learned through her 20 years of experience that such support goes a long way towards helping individuals of all ages integrate their grief in a way that allows them to thrive in life. For more information on Andrea please visit her website [www.andreawarnick.com](http://www.andreawarnick.com)

