

Funerals, memorial services, cremation, and burials are important rituals of mourning that help to signify that something important has occurred. They serve as “markers” that identify changes and social transitions that oftentimes transcend the death itself. There is no “right” or “wrong” way to approach these traditions, but they can sometimes be confusing for both adults and children. Here are some tips and thoughts that may help to explain and manage these rituals as you grieve.

Provide honesty, consistency, compassion, sensitivity and support. Children grieve differently than adults. It is important to allow your child to be able to trust that you will be open and honest in age-appropriate ways and that you will allow them the time and space to ask questions and process their response(s). Remember that children may need only simple responses; but they may need to repeat their questions, to hear you repeat the answer, and to ask more questions at a later time.

Release yourself from the feeling of having to have all of the answers. Sometimes adults believe that they need to have all of the answers for children. It is okay to explain to a child that you don't know the answer to a question but that you will think about it – or research it further – and get back to him/her about it. Be sure, however, to follow up as this sends a message that the child is heard, respected and acknowledged as important.

Ask young people if they want to attend the funeral or memorial service. Very young children, of course, cannot help you to make this decision, but older ones (around 4 and up) can. Since so much can feel out of control for grieving children, the ability to make this choice can be empowering for them. Telling children a little about what they can expect can help to de-mystify what may – to them - be a series of strange practices. Funerals and memorial services can actually help to facilitate the grieving process for younger people, and participation in them can help to make them feel less alone and more a part of a caring community.

If a child or young person wishes to attend a funeral or memorial service, prepare him/her for what may occur – especially if it is his/her first service (or first service of a particular faith tradition). Explain roughly how long the service will be, what he/she can expect to see, hear, and experience. Also prepare them for what may happen before and after the service. If possible, visit the place where the service will be held ahead of time so that the child may see where the restroom, water fountain and sitting/play area are located. You may also wish to have another adult – aside from you – that can act as a support to the child if he/she needs to leave the service to get water, a breath of fresh air, or to leave the service entirely. Children dose themselves as to how much they can handle emotionally. Additionally, for very young children – who may not realize that death is permanent – the memory of a funeral can serve as an important marker to help explain the permanence of death.

Invite children and young people to participate in the service (and/or the planning of the service) if they would like. You may ask them if they wish to help to pick out the casket (or urn), if they want to place a message, picture, or drawing in the casket. You may also ask if they would like to help to pick out clothing for the deceased person to wear or if they wish to select reading, music, or songs for the service. This can help young people to feel vested, involved and a part of the ritual(s). It can also help to facilitate the process of more formally saying good-bye to the deceased family member. Also emphasize that – while acknowledging the death of the person – funerals also honor the life and the memories of the person.

Some children may experience a wide range of emotions and responses. They may be crying one minute and laughing or wanting to play the next. Let your child know that this is a common response and that it is okay for feelings to change. If your child needs a place to laugh and have fun but is disturbing others at the service, make sure that you explain to him/her that his/her feelings are okay but that others may need to be more solemn or quiet.

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Let him/her know that he/she can go somewhere close by – but out of earshot – where he/she can play and/or express him/herself. Make sure that there is someone who can take him/her into another area where he/she can express themselves as they need to.

Allow children to change their minds. Children's feelings can change quickly, and they may change their minds about attending. Allow that to happen and prepare for those potential shifts in choice.

If a child is adamant about not attending, you may wish to explore his/her reasons in a non-judgmental, but inquisitive way. Oftentimes it is misunderstanding or misconceptions about what will happen at a funeral or memorial service that may be troubling for a child. Clarifying any misconceptions can help a child to make an informed and educated choice around this issue. However, if the child sincerely wishes not to attend, it is important that he/she not feel guilty about this choice. You can take pictures or a video of the service (or at least part of it) and write about it and share about it with the child when he/she is ready. Allow him/her to know that you are available to discuss it whenever he/she would like.

Provide children with choices such as: looking at the body in the casket or touching it if they want to; writing a message or drawing a picture and placing it in the casket if they wish; sharing memories of the person if they would like; or visiting with friends or relatives who can provide support and comfort.

If you feel that you are not able to attend (or are too overwhelmed to provide support for your children), then explain to your child exactly how you are feeling and ask another family member or friend to support him/her. Tell your child who that person is and coordinate so that all parties are aware of how communication is to happen and how everyone is to be supported.

Be prepared to face possible disapproval from other adults for your choices around these issues. Acute grief can be challenging for all concerned. There may be others who disagree with your decisions around the above-mentioned issues. While they can have their opinions and feelings, you also have a right to yours – and to the intimate decisions that must be made soon after a family member dies. Oftentimes they are uncomfortable with seeing children sad or in distress; however, loss, sadness, distress – and everything else that comes with the grieving process – is a part of our life experience. Supporting children through these difficult times can be an invaluable asset to them and can help them to manage the loss as well as adapt to the many changes that come with it.

Some important concepts that you may wish to share with your children are:

- Death – when the body stops working and a person is no longer alive. He/she cannot see, hear, speak, walk, talk or do anything that living people do.
- Deceased – word that means the same as dead.
- Funeral/memorial – service where we remember the deceased and honor him/her, celebrate his/her life and both give and receive support from others.
- Funeral home – where the body is taken and stored until the funeral takes place.
- Embalming – use of chemicals to preserve the deceased person's body.

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- Viewing – when individuals come to view the body (or the casket, if it is closed casket) to express their feelings to the family and friends of the deceased. (Some funeral directors may offer a special viewing just for children where they explain many things in an age-appropriate way; you may ask about this.)
- Casket – special box that holds the body that can be opened or closed and that is closed before burial or cremation. It also has handles on the side so that it can be carried.
- Eulogy – a speech about the person who died.
- Hearse – special long car that holds the casket and is used to transport the casket and body of the deceased person from one place to another.
- Grave – a specially dug hole in the ground where the casket containing the body of the deceased person is placed.
- Burial – when the body of the deceased person is placed in a hole in the ground and then covered back up with dirt.
- Cremation – the process by which the body of the deceased person is placed in a very hot room and, as a result, turns to ash. Because dead people cannot feel anything, they do not experience the heat during the cremation. The ashes are then usually placed in a container called an urn.
- Gravestone – A type of marker that is made out of stone that has the deceased person's name on it that marks where he/she is buried.
- Columbarium – place where ashes of deceased people who are cremated are kept.

Listen to what others are telling your children. While others may attempt to be helpful by providing your children with comments such as “Don’t cry,” “Be brave,” “Don’t be sad,” or “Your father wouldn’t want you to cry,” these comments – and others like them - can actually deny children an important part of their grieving process. Acknowledge to your children that different people may have different beliefs and may be trying to be helpful, but that we may experience many, many different feelings and responses when we are grieving, and they are all okay.

Share your own faith tradition with your children, or share with them your own questions about this tradition. After the death of someone close, it is customary to grapple with large and important questions that often involve spiritual beliefs, assumptions about the world and how it works, and what meaning the death may have in our lives. This happens for children too – usually at a different level than for adults, but it still happens. Allowing children the permission to ask and wonder about these questions and issues is important. Letting them know that you don’t have all of the answers is okay too.