

Factsheet: Funerals and saying goodbye



The Irish Childhood
Bereavement Network

Funerals and saying goodbye

Funerals are an important part of the journey through grief, for adults and children alike. At such an emotional time it can be hard to think of what is best for children with everything that is going on. However it is very important to include them in some way in the rituals after a death so that they feel included and most importantly that they get the opportunity to say goodbye to a person who was important to them, in an appropriate way. It is important not to assume that children know what happens at funerals. It may be helpful to think about the following:

Talking to children about funerals:

- Children, like adults need the chance to say goodbye.
- Try to include children in some or the entire funeral.
- Children do not generally understand what funerals are so you will have to tell them about funerals, what happens, who will be there, what a coffin is, and how people might be reacting.
- If children are old enough to understand about burial or cremation, they should be told what will happen to the body. (Where is Daddy's Body now, a book by Elke Barber, may be helpful to read with your child).
- Children can be part of the decision to attend the funeral or not, if they are old enough to do this. Listen to their worries or fears about attending a funeral and answer their questions honestly. Don't force them but give them choice to be included.

Special time before the funeral:

- It may be possible for children to go to the funeral home or church before everyone else so that they get quiet time with the deceased. This can help you to explain what is happening to them, and it can help children to understand what has happened to the body and to talk to the person who has died. It gives them time to deliver their messages or mementos to the deceased. Allow enough time for this and remember that children will need to ask questions and may ask the same questions again and again.

During the removal or funeral:

- If children are old enough to be in the funeral home, it can help to ask an adult they are close to, such as a family friend, to stay with them while you meet people.
- Reassure children that they can decide when they would like to leave, that they do not have to stay for the whole ceremony.
- Talk to children about how they might feel emotionally during a funeral, that it might be sad or confusing for them. Give them the facts about what will happen. Sometimes, children can feel overwhelmed and may become very quiet or behave as if nothing is happening.
- Older children may be invited to be part of the ceremony, for example doing a reading or a prayer. Often it is good to have an adult standing close by for support when they do this. They should not be forced or expected to do this and if they agree, they need to know that they can change their mind at any time, even at the last minute.

How funerals can help children:

- To be part of the family saying goodbye together.

- To respect the person who has died.
- To feel the love and support of others who care about them.
- They can realise how popular the deceased person was when they see so many people attending and this can be very comforting.
- Hearing other people's stories about the deceased can show them things they never knew and can be helpful in their grieving
- They can help children to understand what has happened to the person.
- Children learn that it is ok to be sad when someone dies and that it is ok to cry.
- It can help ease the return to school if children meet their teachers or fellow pupils during the funeral.
- Children can feel cared for by others.

For further information see: www.childhoodbereavement.ie

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