



# Saying Goodbye

*Preparing a Child for a  
Funeral or Cremation*

# Saying Goodbye

Many adults express concerns about how to prepare children for attending or participating in a funeral ceremony—or whether to include children at all.

As you think about this, remember that a child seeks understanding and, especially, reassurance from the adults in his or her life.

If children—of any age—are surrounded by an atmosphere of love and support from their family, they can begin the process of discovering how a funeral can be supportive to grieving family members and friends.

## **Should the child attend the funeral or other ceremony?**

Children can be given the choice.

After they are prepared for what they may experience at a funeral, even preschool children can be given the option about whether or not they want to attend the viewing and the funeral service itself.

Often, children would rather stay with their parent or another significant adult, wherever that person will be. Children also often have some curiosity about the funeral and would like to see for themselves what is happening.

Children should not be forced to attend a funeral, however. If they do choose not to attend, it may be important to try and understand why so that you can talk with them about any fears they may have. If they are feeling fearful, it's important to have an adult who is close to the child care for them, at the child's home if possible.

Even if the child doesn't attend the funeral, they may still be full of questions about it. Taking and sharing photographs from the day can help in explaining it.

## **What if the child doesn't know the person who died?**

Children can be given the choice in this case as well. On the positive side, attending a funeral without a close connection to the person who died provides children with some idea of how people behave at funerals.

## **Should the child view the body?**

In the same way, the child himself or herself can be the guide. If they don't want to see the body, there's no reason to force them to.

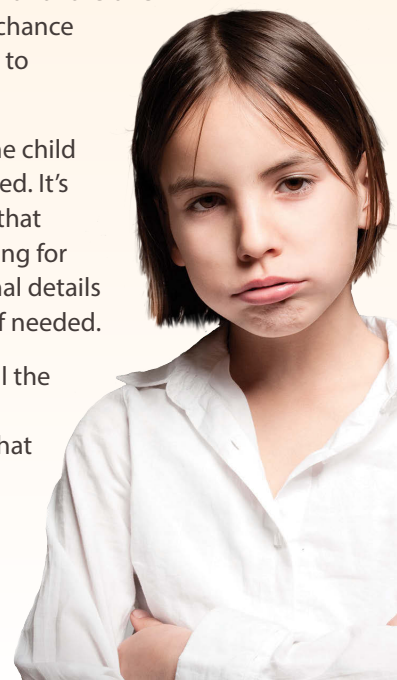
On the other hand, if they would like to view the body, they can be encouraged to do so, with an adult caregiver who can answer any questions that arise, or respond to however the child might react.

## **Are they old enough to understand?**

The reason for funerals can be explained to the child in age-appropriate language. Funerals are a time for those who loved the person who died to comfort one another, to honor the one who died and provide a chance to say goodbye, and also to remember that person.

Only as much detail as the child needs should be presented. It's important to remember that children are usually looking for simple answers. Additional details can always be provided if needed.

It's also OK not to have all the answers. You can always say, "I just don't know. What do you think?" This can also open up the door to hearing what the child is thinking and feeling.



### How can I support the child?

If children choose to attend a viewing and/or a funeral, it may be helpful to assign a special close relative or friend to be with them the entire time if their parent or parents are going to be involved in greeting visitors, or if they are going to be emotionally unavailable to the child.

Of course, if a child seems overwhelmed at any point, it is the adult's role to see that the child is taken to a safe place with a familiar, safe adult to care for them.

### How can children participate in the funeral?

There are many ways that even very young children can participate in the funeral. Participation does not have to be elaborate, but it gives the child a sense of ownership of the funeral process.

Children can be involved by:

- Picking out flowers
- Drawing a picture to place in the casket
- Writing a note to the one who died to be placed in the casket
- Creating a collage of pictures
- Choosing a personal item of the person who died to be displayed
- Helping to choose the casket or cremation urn

### How can children be prepared?

Children need to be prepared for what they will see, hear, smell, touch and taste at a funeral. This will differ, of course, depending on religion, culture and belief. Preparation reduces anxiety and unexpected surprises.

As with any other aspect of the whole funeral process, literal descriptions of what will happen rather than euphemisms are more helpful for children, especially very young children.

For example, use the person's family name ("Daddy" or "Uncle Harry" or "Nana"). Explain that the child will see that person's body in a big box called a casket. Also tell the children that it will look like he or she is sleeping, but it is not the person we remember, it is just their "body"—another word that is important to use.

You can say that this person continues to live on in our memories, explaining it in terms appropriate to your family's beliefs.

Prepare children for the aroma of flowers in a funeral home and explain that many people send flowers to comfort the family and to show how much they loved the person who died.

If children want to touch the body, prepare them for the fact that it will feel hard and cold, almost like wood, and not soft like a living body.

Some funeral homes have a room where the family can sit and eat cookies or drink soda pop and coffee. Tell the children if this is the case. Also prepare them for eating at a reception or wake following the burial.

Children also need to be prepared for the emotions they may witness at a visitation or funeral. Some people may be crying and others may be laughing as they tell funny and happy stories about the person who died.

This situation can be used as an opportunity to teach even the youngest child to tell their stories about the person who died:

*We mourn by remembering,  
and we remember through  
our stories.*



## How do I explain the burial or cremation and what happens to the body?

It is difficult to always know how very young children will respond to some information, but good, accurate and appropriate information is usually better than no information.

Children who are told nothing about burial or cremation are left only with their fantasies, which can often be scarier than the reality.

It is important to explain death and what happens to the body before attempting to explain burial or cremation. A child can be told that after someone dies, their body stops working, and the person doesn't breathe or think or feel anymore.

### Burial

If the person who died will be buried and the child will be at the cemetery, it is important to prepare the child for what they will see there.

They can be told that the box (casket) will be closed with their loved one's body inside, and that the box with the body inside it will be lowered into the ground.

Reassure the child that their loved one cannot feel anything anymore—that none of this will hurt. They can also be told that in the future, the family can come back to this spot if they would like to and visit the place where the body is buried (or interred).

### Cremation

Children can be told that cremation is a process where the body of the person who died is placed in a very hot room. It can be emphasized that it is only the person's body, which can't feel anything, that is in the room.

After the body is heated, it turns into "cremains" or ashes. The cremains, or ashes, are usually then placed in a container of some sort. It might be a plastic or cardboard box, or even a metal can. Some families choose to put the cremains in a special container provided by the funeral director, usually called an "urn." These may be made out of wood or metal or ceramic and can be very beautiful.

If more information is needed to explain either burial or cremation, a funeral director can be asked for more details.

### Reassurance when the child is afraid

When a child experiences the death of someone close, what we have seen over and over is that their fear of someone else dying is often very strong.

Before, during and after the funeral, a child needs to be told by his primary caregiver, ***"I intend to be here to take care of you and to keep you safe."***

Since no one knows that they will be around to take care of the child, the word "intend" is the most powerful thing that can honestly be said. It is reassuring to a child to hear this.

Children need to hear this over and over in the months ahead to be constantly reassured that they will be cared for and their needs will be met.



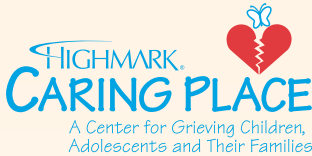


# About the Highmark Caring Place

The Highmark Caring Place is dedicated to making a difference in the lives of grieving children.

It is the mission of the Highmark Caring Place:

- To raise awareness of the needs of grieving children
- To provide programs to address those needs
- To equip the community to support those children who have experienced the death of a loved one



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