

HIGHMARK.


CARING PLACE 

finding hope in grief

Preparing children for
funerals and cremations

Saying goodbye





Introducing children to funerals

The days just after a loss are loaded with emotions and questions. What kind of ceremony is going to happen? How can the kids get involved? Should they attend? What's most appropriate?

What are funerals for?

- Remembering and honoring the one who died
- Comforting each other
- Providing a chance to say goodbye

Key things to remember when planning a child's involvement or answering their questions:


Speak at their level. You know your child. Speak in terms they will understand at their age level. Avoid softening the language with phrases like "they're gone" or "we lost them."

Give them choices. Whatever the options are, ask what they'd like. Don't force anything.

Share information a little at a time. Let them tell you through their questions and body language if they are ready and want to hear more.

Keep them close to loved ones. Whether they're home or by your side, they should always have a hand to hold.

When children of any age are surrounded by love and support from their family, they can discover how funerals support grieving family and friends.



Giving choices

Do they want to go?

They may be curious but hesitant. Be flexible. They may change their mind often, even last minute.

What if they don't want to go?

Make sure they're in a familiar place. Ideally at home, with someone close to them.

What should they do while at the funeral home?

Many funeral homes offer spaces for children to hang out and play. Give them the choice to go there whenever they want and stay as long as they need.

If it's open casket, should they view the body?

Provide kids with the information to make this choice. If they don't want to see the body, there's no reason to push it. If they would like to view the body, do so with a trusted adult.

Defining roles

To help children feel included, consider giving them a role at the ceremony. It will help them know what will happen and give them something to focus on.

They can be involved by:

- Picking out flowers to decorate the space or give to a loved one.
- Drawing a picture to place by the casket.
- Writing a note to the person who died, possibly placed in the casket.
- Choosing and displaying a photo or personal item of the person who died.
- Helping to choose the casket or cremation urn.

Make sure they have an assigned buddy at the event. That could be you or another trusted adult. Someone whose job it is to make sure the child stays comfortable.

" The ache of loss can coexist with the ability to laugh. "

— by Elena Lister, MD and
Michael Schwartzman, PhD



Explaining and processing

Death

Children who are told nothing about a burial or cremation rely on their imagination, which can be scarier than reality. You can tell them that after someone dies, their body stops working, and the person doesn't breathe, think, or feel pain anymore.

Burial

Tell them that the box, or casket, will be closed with their loved one's body inside. It will be lowered into the ground and later covered with dirt. Tell the child that the family can come back to this spot if they ever want to visit.

Cremation

Tell them cremation is when the body is heated in a very hot room and turns to ashes. These ashes are then put in a container, like a simple box or a decorated urn.



Preparing their senses and emotions

Before you go, paint a picture in their mind. Tell them all about funeral homes and how they work. Go over the day's schedule. Engage their senses in your descriptions.

Smell

Sometimes children feel overwhelmed by the smell of more flowers than they have encountered before.

Taste

Highlight each place where there will be food and drink, such as a room at the funeral home, or at a reception or wake after the burial. Sight

Tell them that they might see the person's body in a big box called a casket. Explain that their loved one may look different than they remember. You can say it will look like the person is sleeping. Remind them that they're not and that they won't wake up or move.

Touch

If they want to touch the body, prepare them for it to feel hard and cold.

Hear

There will be strong emotions. Some people may cry or sob. Often people may share their funniest stories about the person who died. So there's also laughing.

Speak

Encourage them to tell their stories too. We mourn by remembering, and we remember through our stories.



Soothing fear

When a child experiences the death of someone close, they can become terrified someone else will die too. Reassure the child before, during, and after the funeral. You can say, **“I intend to be here to take care of you and to keep you safe.”**

Since you can’t know how long you will care for a child, the word “intend” is powerful and honest. Children need to hear this often in the time ahead. Reassure them that they will be cared for and their needs will be met.

Helping grieving children and families heal over a lifetime

Our mission is to create a world of compassionate communities where all people can find hope and healing after the death of a loved one. We provide grief support for families and individuals of all ages through peer groups, education, and advocacy.

Where to find us

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