



Because You Asked Should My Child Attend the Funeral?

After a death there are often many decisions regarding funeral/memorial services that need to be made fairly quickly. One of these common questions is about whether or not it is appropriate for children to attend the service, and if so what considerations need to be made.

Excluding children from funeral rites may leave young people feeling left out of the family and without an opportunity to express their grief. There is little evidence that attending a funeral can lead to negative outcomes, despite parents and caregiver's desires to protect children from distress (Holland, 2004).

Instead, participating in a cultural rite is often normalizing for young people in that they witness an array of grief responses and are attended to by their community (Aspinall, 1996).

Here are some considerations to help you and children navigate through funerals and memorial services:

Provide Choice

- Research indicates that children should be given the choice about attending a service. Those who want to attend should be able to do so. Children who don't want to attend should not be forced.
- It may be prudent to process their decision non-judgmentally so they do not later have regrets.

Give the Child a Role

- When children and teens can be involved in the service they are likely to feel included in the family and validated in their relationship with the deceased.
- Helping choose a casket or urn or giving input on musical selections, readings, slideshows or providing a speech or eulogy is usually a meaningful contribution for young people.

Front load with Information

Help young people understand what to expect before, during and after the service:.

General Protocol

- Explain that services are designed to honour and remember the deceased's life.
- Let them know that people will have many different emotions and they may experience and witness tears, laughter, stories, photographs, music etc.
- If there is a reception following the service let young people know how they may be approached with condolences. Give ideas on how to respond to comments like "I'm sorry for your loss".
- Normalize how aspects of the service might be fun; many young people enjoy seeing extended family and friends at the service, reporting memories of having fun with cousins or friends.

Body of the Deceased will be Present

- If there will be a viewing of the body talk about how the person might look different than they remember.
- Provide choice about viewing the body.
- Allow time for the child to prepare something if it is acceptable for them to put a note or memento in the casket.

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Cremation

- Explain to children that the cremation occurs at a special site called a crematorium and unless culturally sanctioned it will not be part of the service.
- Use simple explanations to help children understand that cremation is a way of using heat to change body into small particles like coarse sand. Words like fire and burn can be frightening for children.
- Reassure them that the body doesn't feel any pain.
- Talk about how the remains will be put in a special container, called an urn, and the family can decide where to keep it.

Graveside Service

- Let children know if there is a graveside service that the casket will be put in the ground and this will be a place they can visit in the future.

Have a Backup Plan

- Explain to the child that at any time they can change their mind about attending the service.
- It can be helpful to designate a support person who is more removed from the death who can be available if the child wants to leave. They may experience surprising emotions and it is best if they have someone who can be with them to make sense of the experience or do something else to take a break from the service.

Consider Age and Stage

- No child is too young to attend a funeral. See the [Child Grief](#) handout for more information on grief and development.

[Printable handout](#) of this article

Aspinall, S. Y. (1996). Educating children to cope with death: a preventive model. *Psychology in Schools*, 33, 341-349. Holland, J. (2004). Should children attend their parent's funerals? *Pastoral Care*, March, 10-14.

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