

Involving Children in Death Rituals

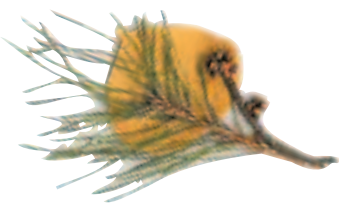
As parents we want to protect our children from the pain that we experience when someone we love dies. However, children who are old enough to love are old enough to grieve. It is easier for children to be included in family grief than to be excluded. When family members provide a safe, comforting, and loving place for children to share the experience of grief, they are promoting the development of healthy coping skills. We would not choose to have this experience with grief but we can make choices to include our children and so help them to become sensitive, caring adults who are equipped to deal with life's losses.

What happens when someone dies?

Children understand the simple explanation that we die because our bodies stop working - our hearts don't beat anymore, we don't breathe, we don't feel, we don't move. It is important to avoid using euphemisms like "passed away, went to sleep, went on a long trip, is lost".

It is a good idea to say "very, very, very sick or hurt or old" to reinforce that we don't necessarily die when we are sick or hurt or old.

Family religious or cultural beliefs can be included here in addition to the physical explanation of death .



e.g. "Grandpa died because he was very, very, very sick and his heart stopped beating. His body doesn't work anymore. In our family we believe that the spirit of the person who dies goes to heaven."

e.g. "Jamie died because he was hit by a car and his body was very, very, very badly hurt. He died because his body stopped working, his heart stopped beating. We believe that Jamie is now an angel in heaven and he will always watch over us."

It is true that we will never see that person again; however we can always enjoy our memories of that special person. Children like to close their eyes and "see" a memory that is theirs to keep forever.

Should children go to the funeral?

Helping children learn and understand what to expect at funerals and during the grieving process teaches them to cope with crises.

Funerals provide a unique opportunity for the natural expression of grief, for the sharing of loving feelings about someone who has died and to say "goodbye" in a supporting way. It is comforting for children to be present with other people who have loved and cared about the special person who has died. It is also reassuring for children to hear stories and memories about their loved one.

Involving children in the funeral ceremony helps to establish a sense of comfort at being included and to affirm that life goes on even though it is significantly different from when the special person was alive.

At what age should a child attend a funeral?

There are no rules for including children in the rituals surrounding a loved one's death. A child of any age can attend. It is a good idea to have a caring adult sit with each child at the funeral – to be with the child if s/he has questions or wants to leave.

There are two important principles to guide us in involving children: they should be told what to expect and they should be given a choice. Children need to know what will happen and what to expect (flowers, music, tears, laughter, etc.). They should be given the same opportunity as any other family member to attend the funeral. However they should never be forced to attend. If they choose not to attend, offer to tell them about the service or perhaps have it videotaped so they can watch it later if they wish.

Should a child attend a visitation?

The same principles apply to involving children in visitation and viewing the body – they should be told what to expect and then asked if they would like to attend. Children do not have an innate fear of a dead body, this is a learned response from adults. The natural curiosity of children does make them ask such questions as why is s/he cold? Where are the legs? Children like to draw a picture or write a letter to the person who has died and place it in the casket or in a pocket.

How can I explain cremation to my child?

Children seem to be very matter-of-fact about the cremation process once they understand that the person is dead and does not feel anything anymore. Cremation involves intense heat that changes the body into ashes. The cremated remains are then put in a special container called an urn. This might then be buried in the cemetery or placed in a columbarium.

Should my child visit the cemetery?

Children are naturally curious about burying the body. They need an explanation of what to expect and then to be given the choice of attending the burial. Children like to be included in rituals and can participate by handing out flowers for mourners to place in the ground or on top of the casket, or by writing a letter or drawing a picture and placing it on top of the casket. They can also participate by helping to replace some of the earth after the casket has been lowered.

If we provide children with the opportunity to participate in funeral rituals we are teaching them healthy coping skills. If we let them lead us on their grief journeys they will tell us what they need and want to know.



Good Grief Workshops for Children and Adolescents are offered twice a year in April and November. These one-day workshops provide a safe, non-judgmental environment where grieving children and teens (aged 4-17 years) can tell their stories, share thoughts and feelings and honor the memories of special people in their lives who have died.

A concurrent Parent Discussion Group gives parents/guardians the opportunity to discuss the topic of children and adolescents grief.

For more information, please call
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