

# How to Explain Funerals to Children



It is a subject that most parents would rather avoid, but when a family member or someone close to your family dies, it is an inevitable conversation. Children want answers about death and particularly the rituals surrounding death. The best way to prepare your child for a funeral or to explain the purpose of a funeral is to be honest about death and address their thoughts and concerns before the funeral.

The funeral will have a long-term impact on the child, whether he attends or not. Attending without appropriate education, information and support can leave a child confused and fearful. **A child who is frightened about attending a funeral should not be forced to go; however, honouring or remembering the person in some way, such as lighting a candle, saying a prayer, making a scrapbook, reviewing photographs, or telling a story may be helpful.** Children should be given the opportunity to choose the level of participation they are comfortable with and not be pressured into making a decision based on parents' needs. **The most helpful thing a parent can do is to give the child choices.**

**Give the children clear explanations of what will happen at the funeral.**

- Who will be at the funeral service?
- What is going to happen?
- Where will the service take place?
- When will the funeral happen?
- Why are we doing this?
- What is expected of the child?

## **What about viewing the body?**

Below is a list of important facts a child might want to know before choosing to view the body. The body:

- is in an open or a partially open casket
- is cool in temperature
- does not move
- can not talk or see you
- will not come back to life
- may have markings, etc. from injury or illness
- will look and feel different than the person did before death
- may have a different smell

## **Discussion**

### **1. Step 1**

Talk about death and what that means physically. If you use the word "died" instead of "passed away" or other commonly used terms for death, children may grasp the finality of death more easily.

### **2. Step 2**

Encourage children to express their emotions, and let them see you cry or laugh, however you handle death. Explain that people mourn in different ways at funerals, too, and every way is acceptable.

### **3. Step 3**

Explain that we have funerals to say goodbye and to comfort each other. These are familiar concepts that children can relate to.

### **4. Step 4**

Prepare children for an open casket. You, of course, are the judge of whether you want your children to participate in this part of the service. If you feel it is appropriate for them, you might explain that this gives people a chance to say goodbye one more time. This part of the funeral is frightening for children, especially the first time, so be prepared for questions and answer them honestly.

#### 5. Step 5

Go over the funeral service in detail. Cover every aspect of the service, and be open to their questions. Children may get nervous at funerals if they don't know what is happening next, so prepare them ahead of time.

#### 6. Step 6

Describe where the funeral is and what the funeral home or church will look like. Let them know where the body or casket will be placed and where they can sit if they become uncomfortable.

#### 7. Step 7

Visit a cemetery before the funeral and talk openly about what will happen at the burial.

### **Tips & Warnings**

- Include your religious beliefs when explaining funerals to children.
- You should anticipate a change in children's behaviour during or after a funeral. Let them mourn in their own way, but let them know when their behaviour becomes inappropriate.
- Don't force children to participate in funerals if they are too nervous. Give them the option, but let them know it is okay to just attend.



