

Preparing your Child to Say Goodbye

Death is an uncomfortable topic for any age, but it can be especially difficult for children. Adults often seek to shelter children from the reality of death, thinking that children are too young, too innocent or too fragile to understand or cope with death.

Just as adults experience loss, so do children. Whether the loss is from a death of a family member or beloved pet, moving, the divorce of parents or changing schools, children experience loss and the grief associated with that loss. We cannot shelter children from grief, so we must help children to understand and deal with grief appropriately. How adults deal with children during a time of profound grief and sadness affects how the children deal with the grief themselves.

When explaining death to children, it is important to be honest, supportive and patient. It is also important to communicate to children in language they understand. Talk openly with children; let them know it is okay to cry and to be sad. It is also OK not to cry. Acknowledge their grief and express your own feelings. The manner in which adults express grief provides a model for which children can express their own feelings.

When speaking of death, the question of whether children should attend the funeral always arises. This decision may be based upon family traditions and beliefs, but parents should talk with children and give them choices. Unfamiliar, or unexpected situations may complicate the grief process.

- Be direct. Explain what the child may encounter at the funeral. Who will be at the service? Where will it be? Will the body be present? What is cremation? Tell the child that he will see a wide variety of emotions, including tears, somber faces, even laughter.
- Let them know that it is acceptable to display their emotions. Explaining these in advance prepares children and allows them to decide whether they want to attend the services.
- The key is to allow a child to attend funeral services, not to force him. Not allowing a child to attend a funeral service may make him or her feel they were not allowed to say goodbye, while forcing a child to attend may make him or her resentful or scared and complicate the grieving process.

After children have been told the "what," tell them the "why." Explain that the funeral service is a celebration of a life well lived, an opportunity to honor the individual as a community of friends and family, as well as a time to comfort one another. Tell them the funeral is a time to say goodbye, underscoring the finality of death and that the individual is gone and will not return. If there is a religious ritual, explain it in terms the child will understand and explain the significance of the ritual in your cultural heritage.

In planning funeral services, adults should be open to a child's involvement. Children have been called the "forgotten mourners," because they are often excluded from funeral services or, when included, are greeted with a pat on the head or a trite comment from adults they don't even know. By creating an atmosphere where the children participate in, not merely attend, funeral services, they gain a sense of comfort and realize their thoughts and fears are being recognized. Participation may take many forms, from placing a letter or drawing in the casket to reading poetry or special scriptures or to releasing balloons at the gravesite. Whatever role children might play, participating in the service helps them to understand and accept the finality of death and facilitates the healing process.

By explaining death, respecting children's grief and allowing them to grieve in their own manner, adults help children learn about the joy and pain associated with close relationships. How we respond to death, both through our own grief and how we deal with our children's, shapes a child's attitude toward both life and death.

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