

Preparing a Child to Attend a Memorial Service

Deciding If Your Child Should Attend

The decision to allow a young child to attend another child's funeral or wake is sensitive. Use your discretion. There is no right or wrong. Your personal decision is okay. If your child is insistent that he/she wants to attend, but you feel your child is too young, or emotionally fragile, you may choose to explain the process, and offer to bring a token to the service on behalf of the child. You may want to consider allowing your child to visit the family within a few days after the service, or plan to visit the gravesite, if possible. Assure your child that the deceased and his/her family know that he/she was loved by your child.

Below are guidelines that and may help you in your decision: When deciding whether your child should attend a funeral or memorial service, age is not the most important consideration. Your child is part of the family or community, and children who are old enough to love are old enough to grieve.

No child is too young to attend a funeral, provided that the child is prepared for what will happen and what he or she will see at the funeral home, and is lovingly guided through the process. Some children may feel shut out or begin to think that death and grief are too horrible to be faced. This can be an opportunity to share that although loved people do die, there will always be somebody there to take care of those still living.

Talking to Your Child

Children benefit from preparation prior to attending a funeral or memorial service. Often older children may engage you in a conversation about the upcoming experience, but some may not. It is important to sit with your child and have an honest discussion about what to expect. A frank and general discussion helps set the pace for a child to cope with the loss in a healthy way.

In any unknown situation, understanding what will happen is the easiest way to feel prepared. You may want to describe what the experience will be like to help them prepare. Consider saying something like the following example edited from another source:

“When we go into the funeral home, there will be a book at the door where we can sign our names so the family will know we came to visit. We’ll probably have to wait on a long line because lots of other people will be there, too. In the front of the room or church, will be the casket. That’s where the body will be. The top of the casket may be open so people who want to can go and say goodbye. If you’d like to do that we can, but it’s not something we have to do. Sometimes the casket may be closed, with lots of flowers on top of it. The family is usually in the front of the room and everyone who chooses can walk past them and tell them how sad they about the loss. Sometimes people will tell them a story - how much they liked her or what they did together. You can think about this and see what you feel like saying when the time comes. If you don’t want to say anything, that’s okay, too, or you can simply say, “I’m sorry.” There will probably be pictures of her and her family and friends around the room, or a video playing. As the time to visit is coming to an end, a member of the clergy may lead those still there in a prayer. You may not be familiar with all the religious practices, or rituals, but that is okay. It is important to respect how the family’s religion responds to a person’s death. Do you have any questions?”

Children may be nervous about what to do or say when approaching the immediate family members of the deceased. Explain that it is okay to simply give them a hug, shake their hand or give them a reassuring nod. Some appropriate things to say are:

- I came because I care
- I am sorry, and I miss her, too
- I am thinking about you; I am here for you

Explain that even though this is a very sad time, they may be surprised to see that not everybody will be crying, and they may even feel a sense of calmness. It is normal to have moments of peace, as well as crying.

Finally, encourage children to support each other in the days following the services:

- Check in with each other
- Do things to distract your mind
- Take breaks from grief
- Spend more time together
- Reach out to school counselors or other adults if you are struggling with your grief

Levels of Participation

Participation can bring great comfort to the grieving. Acting out time honored traditions, or expressing our love and feelings of loss in a funeral or memorial service can help children, as well as adults, acknowledge the importance of our loved ones and our relationship with them. It is a final gift to the deceased, and helps us to move forward with our lives.

Some ways that people may participate are:

- Saying a few words or reading something to those present
- Friends and schoolmates may bring condolence or Mass cards which can be placed in a basket near the door
- Some family and friends may have ordered floral arrangements, which were delivered and set up prior to the service.

Accompany your child to the funeral

Teens may want to go to the wake and funeral with their friends and may not want a parent to accompany them. Please let your teen know you completely understand and support their need to be with their friends during this sad time. Also let them know you understand how difficult it is to say goodbye to a friend. Tell them you would like to attend the wake and funeral but assure them that you will stay in the background and not interfere in their grief work with their friends.

Please do not hesitate to contact school administration or your child's teacher should you desire further assistance. Counselors will be available at school. Please call if you would like a counselor to see your child prior to, or after, the service.

Information above was adapted from:

Cheri Lovre- Crisis Management Institute

www.hospiceofthevalley.org

<http://www.remembranceprocess.com/>

<http://www.sptsusa.org/pdfs/preparing-child.pdf>