

CHILDREN AND TEENS ATTENDING FUNERALS OR MEMORIAL SERVICES

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Introduction

- Should I bring my daughter to my wife's funeral?
- Isn't my toddler too young to go to a memorial service for his uncle?
- Won't children be upset if they go to a wake?
- Will a vigil ceremony just make the fears worse?

These are common questions from parents and other adults when someone has died or in other times of tragedy. The answers are important and vary according to the individual child and whether the child has been closely affected by a loss.

The meaning of rituals

Understanding the function of rituals can help adults make decisions about children's participation. The funeral or memorial service is only one event in the goodbye process. These rituals are important as concrete markers in time. Although planned activities and services do not provide emotional closure for all feelings, they do signify the end of life and the beginning of a period of change. Feelings about, and reactions to, a person who has died change throughout one's lifetime. With the accumulation of new experiences comes meaning.

Planning for participation at funerals and memorial services

The following points are helpful to consider in helping a child participate in rituals and services.

- To help a child decide if he or she should attend a funeral or memorial service, or when a child services are unlike any other experience. Parents and teachers should explain what the child will see and how people may react. At any age, children can become confused by the events that take place at these rituals and by seeing other people's expression of strong emotions. Funeral home staff are often accommodating and sensitive to parents' wishes if they want to bring a child to the funeral home ahead of time to help in the preparation.
- Inquire about the child's wishes. Attendance should not be a requirement, but it should be an option. It is important to stress that although the funeral occurs at a particular time and place, children are not bad or unloving if they do not attend. It is not their only chance to say goodbye. School-age children and teens can help decide if and how they want to be included.
- Explore different kinds of participation. Private rituals may be preferable for some children. Attendance at the funeral or memorial service is only one way for children to participate and be involved regardless of in person or virtually e.g. zoom. For example, writing a poem or letter that is read aloud or put in a casket or read by an adult, or visiting the grave site and bringing flowers after the burial are some other ways of saying goodbye.
- Remember that attendance does not have to be all or nothing. Parents and teachers should think through the different activities and structure different options, such as going to the funeral service but not the burial, spending an hour at a wake and then going out with a family friend.
- Take into account parents' emotional states and other responsibilities. In the case of a deceased parent, the ability of the surviving parent to attend to the child should be considered. If the parent is distraught or burdened with details, relatives and caretakers

should be enlisted to help. Having a specific identified companion for the child and a plan of activities will relieve pressure on the parents and stress on the child.

- Consider the child's age. Very young children (infants - age 4) simply may not have the physical ability or attention span to attend services. A known caretaker, friend or relative should be the child's companion during funeral activities or at home. This arrangement provides comfort and relieves strain on the immediate family.
- When deciding if children from a class will attend a funeral or pay respects to the family of a classmate or staff member, an adult should find out the details of the arrangements and ask the bereaved family about their preferences. It is impossible to assume what any individual family finds helpful and children and adults are comforted in different ways. The relationship of the children in the class to the person who died should also dictate their level of participation.
- Consider different ways to show support. In addition to attending specific ritualized events, other activities are also appreciated. Taking care of the family's pets while the family is busy with funeral activities, inviting the surviving children out during the wake or occupied with a game if it is being done remotely, having class members send hand-made cards to the family, or making donations to a special cause, are some of the most helpful ways show support.
- Keep in mind that various cultures and religions have different customs and practices. Know and respect the appropriate way to show support in each situation. People of all cultures and religions appreciate hearing that someone cares and remembers them during a difficult time.

Attending a community vigil

- When there is a community or national catastrophic event, such as a bombing or airplane crash, in which people are killed or missing, candle light vigils or other services may be held. Children generally learn of these catastrophes, either through personal losses or those of their friends, or the news media. In these situations, it is often helpful for children to participate in these rituals, to share their feelings of shock and grief and sadness with others. However, children's involvement should not be forced. For those children who may become overwhelmed, parents should use caution and consider a small-scale ceremony to commemorate the victims of the tragedy or find other ways to show concern.

Good bye's are not only about rituals but also about personal feelings and memories. These evolve over time, so do options for times and places to mark someone's life.

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