

Should Your Child Attend the Funeral or Memorial Service?

4 Steps to Help You Decide

When someone dies, parents and caregivers often struggle to decide if their child should attend the funeral or memorial service for the deceased. As a society, we want to shelter children from the painful reality of death, and we struggle with the discomfort of talking about it. In the past, children were kept from attending funerals and memorials because adults felt they were unable to handle it emotionally. But this way of thinking has led to children feeling left out and unable to find healthy closure.

Death is all around us when we watch television or movies, or when we experience the death of a first pet. It is important to remember that children grieve too even if it looks different than the grieving process of an adult. Children have their own grieving process that is unique to the individual child and depends on several factors, including: developmental age, personality, relationship to the deceased, exposure to death, communication about the circumstances, and family support. There is no quick or easy answer when deciding if a child should attend a funeral or memorial service but there are helpful ways to determine the best answer for you, your child and your family.

1 *Age and Development*

A **child's age** should be taken into account when making the decision of attending a service. There is no minimum age requirement, but children's developmental age has an impact on their understanding of the finality of death and what death means to them. Young children under the age of 5 do not always grasp that death is final. Avoid using euphemisms like "in a better place," "lost," or "went to sleep" with children. Such phrases can be confusing, scary or misinterpreted by children even though it may bring comfort to an adult. The use of concrete language and terms like "death" and "died" are important in helping children comprehend the meaning and finality of death.

2 *Relationship to the Deceased*

Assess your **child's relationship to the deceased**. Children should have an opportunity for closure with the deceased whether at the funeral, memorial service or another ceremony that can be created specifically for them. With this in mind, a child should not be forced to attend the funeral or memorial service. Two questions that can be helpful in making this decision are:

- What was the child's relationship to the deceased?
- How does the child perceive the significance of the relationship to the deceased?

The answers to these questions can help determine if a child should attend the funeral or other memorial service.

3 Prepare and Plan

With **preparation and planning**, you can help create comfort in an uncomfortable situation by anticipating your child's needs. Before talking to your child about the funeral or memorial service, gather as many details as possible and communicate those details in age-appropriate language so your child knows what to expect. Preparing and communicating with your child can be done in a variety of ways, including reading books that explain funerals, visiting or showing pictures of where the ceremony will take place, reviewing the sequence of events that will occur during the services, and explaining language relevant to the service. Consider any religious and cultural customs that may occur at the service as your child may be unaware of them. Prepare them for the varying adult reactions that may occur during a service as they may have never witnessed the variety of intense emotions from loved ones.

Depending on your role in the funeral or memorial service, assign a close friend or family member who your child trusts to help him or her feel supported. If your child needs to leave the service at any time, let your child know the assigned friend or family member will accompany him or her. This plan should be discussed and communicated ahead of time with your child. As mentioned above, if children choose not to attend the funeral, their decision should be respected and other options for closure can be created with them, as funerals are not for everyone.

4 Seek Support and Guidance

Family members, friends and professionals that you trust can help provide **support and guidance** as you and your child make a decision about attending the funeral. Be open and honest as you communicate with your child and let your child take the lead as you consider his or her age, development, personality, and relationship with the deceased. This is a personal decision for you and your child, and there is no one size fits all answer. Grief is a journey filled with ups and downs, and everyone copes with it the best they can along the way.

“If a child is old enough to love, he or she is old enough to grieve.”

Linda Goldman, *Life & Loss*



The Center for Grieving Children

The Center for Grieving Children helps children grieving a death heal and grow through their grief, while strengthening families, communities, and professionals' understanding of how best to respond to their needs.



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