

Helping Younger People Cope with Death and Funerals

Understanding the Issue

People have different ideas about whether to include children - no matter what their age - at bedside during someone's final days of life, at the time of death itself, and at the funeral.

Opinions about this differ depending on the family's manner of handling such matters and also on the type of death involved. For example, was the death sudden, or did the illness last a long time? Some adults do not want children to see someone they know growing weaker or hooked to tubing. Opinions also depend on what the child's relationship is with the person who is dying. If it is someone the child does not know very well, maybe it is less important for the young person to visit. Also, consider whether other helpful adults - Or older children can pay attention to the child and help with any questions and feelings.

Included in one's reasoning are his or her ideas about whether children should be involved. They also are shaped by what they were told when they were little, and someone died. Our opinions are shaped by what we learn from our own families about what is "right."

Finally, your opinions about including children are shaped by how you cope with sadness and death yourself. Everyone copes differently.

Objectives:

- Know when to get professional help.
- Plan ahead for any visits with children.
- Answer concerns about dying and death.
- Share decisions about who goes to funerals or memorial services.
- Deal with the possible disapproval of other adults.
- Help young people at the funeral or memorial service.
- Expect struggles with grief both now and in the future.

The Funeral: Ask young people if they want to go to the service.

Asking young people this question depends, of course, on their age. Very young children cannot help you make a decision, but older ones can. Making decisions for these children leaves them out. Young children and teenagers should not be protected from the reality of death, nor should they be shut out of the meals or talks after the funeral or memorial service and burial, if there is one. Shutting them out makes them feel alone. It also gives them the idea that death is so horrible that it cannot be coped with.

Funerals can help young people face their grief. Letting them listen to the planning for the funeral and including their ideas makes them feel that they belong to something that will live on. It also gives them a chance to talk about what has happened. Letting them be part of the "rituals" (the things a family normally does when a death occurs) is an important way to learn about this part of living.

Young children (younger than 8 or 9 years) do not understand that death is permanent. They will ask when Mommy or Grandma is coming back. If young children are not included in the funeral ritual, it will be harder for them to understand what has happened. If they have attended the funeral,

however, you can say, "Remember when we all went to see Grandma in the casket and then we went to see Grandma in the casket, and then we went to the cemetery...?" Without this memory, it will be harder for you to help these children understand.

Ask young people before the service how they are feeling about what is happening. Even after young people know they are going to a funeral, new feelings can surface. Relatives may be arriving. They may meet people who are unfamiliar to them but who claim to remember when they were little. It can be a busy and confusing time. If you are to help them, you need to be aware of what they are feeling.

Tell children what to expect at the funeral home, what they will see, and what will happen both before and after the service. This helps them to prepare for this new experience.

Let them change their minds.

All that said, there may be a change of plans along the way. Young people may decide they want to attend services, but then change their minds. Let them decide. They know what they want to do. If it is important for you to have them there, such as with teenagers, ask them to attend for your sake.

Remind yourself as well as them that it is the memory of the person's life, not the person's death, which is important. It is okay if a young person does not want to go. If a child is very firm that he or she does not want to attend the funeral of a close relative, however, it usually signals that the child is very troubled or confused. Children typically are fascinated by funerals and, most of all, want to be included as part of the family. See if you can get the child to tell you what is worrying him or her about the funeral. Children can have many misconceptions and fears that should be cleared up so that they can feel okay about saying goodbye to the person who has died. Remembering relative or friends when they were alive is what is important; however, funeral services help to remind us that death really has happened. Children of any age usually will benefit from this (just as adults do).

Include them in meals or gatherings after services.

Children want to feel that they belong and leaving them out of special gatherings after services sends a message that they are unimportant. Many times, their feelings are hurt. If a child is struggling with sadness or fear, he or she will feel that much sadder and more abandoned.

Deal with the possible disapproval of other adults.

Expect some adults to disagree with your decision to allow children to attend a memorial or funeral service. Some adults cannot bear to see a child suffer because they are so upset themselves about the death. They want to protect the young person from feeling what they are feeling. Some relatives and friends may say it is a bad idea to let young people attend a funeral. They may say things like, "Seeing grown-ups crying will be too upsetting for her," or "Children do not belong at funerals." If you and other adults decide it is a good idea to include the younger child, some adults may go so far as to say that this is "cruel" or "awful." Although this is rare, should these adults see the child cry, whether at the funeral or later, you may hear them tell others that you should have followed their advice. This can be difficult, but the opposite decision would have been difficult as well. The job of a parent includes helping children deal with life and its sadness. Dealing with death is just one more part of learning about life.