Children and funerals
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Parents and carers want to do the best for their children and it is very hard to know what is best for them when a death has happened. You are trying to come to terms with what has happened, cope with painful and difficult feelings and there are so many decisions to be made.

This leaflet has been written to help you think about your children and the funeral, why they should have the chance to go and how to answer some of their questions.

Why should children go to funerals?

A funeral is a family occasion and your children are part of the family. If they are not given the choice to go or not they may feel they have been left out and therefore not important members of the family. They will not be able to take part in saying goodbye to the person who has died which can make it harder to accept that it has really happened and to start grieving.

They may not be able to understand that a funeral is about someone’s life as well as their death and share the good as well as the bad memories with other relatives and friends.

Explaining a funeral

Many children will never have been to a funeral before and will need you to explain it to them if they are to make a choice about whether they want to go or not. Children take in as much information as they can cope with at one time so keep your explanation quite short to start with. If you are stuck for words you could say something like “a funeral is a special time when all the people who knew a person come together to remember them and say goodbye. There will be special readings and
prayers and music and people will think about the person’s life and how they will remember them. Some people will be very sad and may cry a lot and other people will be thinking about the good memories they have.” You could also explain what the crematorium or church is like if they have never been before or take them to see the outside of the building before the day of the funeral. Your children may come back later with more questions and may need some time to decide whether they want to go or not.

How old should children be before going to a funeral?

Research and experience has shown that children can understand about death sooner than we may think. Most children have a full understanding by the time they are about 8-10 years old and many younger children will understand enough to go to the funeral. Children who are old enough to go to school have learned to be able to sit and concentrate for short periods and will know that this is a special occasion even if there are some things they do not fully understand.

Younger children may find it helpful if they can take their favourite toy and are told that someone will be there who will go outside with them if they find it too difficult. This person does not have to be you, you could ask someone who knows the child well and who will not be as involved in the service as you will be. If you explain the things that are likely to be new to them they will be able to manage this big event just as they managed going to nursery or to school.
How can I help them to feel part of it?

What children can do will depend upon their age and ability. They could help choose the readings, hymns or music. They could choose the flowers and write on the card. They could give out the order of service sheets. Teenagers may want to write something either to read themselves or for someone else to read. Remember that you can decide how things should be and talk it through with the person who is going to take the funeral.

What if they don’t want to go?

Children should not be forced to go if they have understood and chosen not to. If you feel that they are not comfortable with going offer them an alternative that will feel right for you all, perhaps going to a close friend’s house. If they choose to go to school let the teachers know this is a special day for them so that support will be there if they need it. You may want to think about ways you can do things together later to mark the occasion for them, for example visiting the crematorium or cemetery together and making your own special time.

What if I decide that I really don’t want the children to be there?

If this is how you feel you should not feel bad about it, many people feel the same way. Children can understand your explanation that grownups find things difficult too and that funerals are very sad and painful times for everybody.

Remember to take home the cards and you might want someone to take photographs of the flowers. Identify someone (perhaps yourself) who will talk to the children about the funeral and make sure it happens as soon as possible so they do not feel left out.
**How do I explain about burial or cremation?**

Children want to find out about the world and will appreciate your explanation. They will also accept if you say that it is hard for you to talk about things because they make you feel sad. One option is to start with “when someone dies their body is of no use to them anymore and we have to decide what to do with it. We put it in a special box called a coffin and in this country we either bury the body in the ground or we take it to a place where it goes into a very hot oven and is burnt. What made them special to us isn’t there anymore so we say goodbye to their body at the funeral service.”

**What happens next?**

Children, like adults will go through a process of grief. At times they may be very sad, at other times they may be naughty or angry and sometimes they may seem to have forgotten about it. Grief for children is likened to being in a puddle. When they are in it, they are totally immersed but they are soon out the other side and playing again. They will not have forgotten and will want to talk and share memories and feelings. They will look to you to see if it is alright to talk and to show their feelings. Grief can be a very lonely experience and there are services around that can offer you some help or advice for yourself and your children.
If you would find it helpful some of them are:

Community (C.A.M.H.S) Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service; support or advice to aid mental health and promotion of positive wellbeing for children aged 0-18 with excellent links with schools, G.P’s, Health Visitors, school nurses and other specialist services who can refer you to them.

Sunderland Counselling Services;
offer a range of counselling and support services for adults;
Tel: 0191 514 7007
Email: office@sunderlandcounselling.org.uk

Childhood Bereavement Network;
information service for people looking for help for bereaved children anywhere in U.K.;
Tel: 020 7843 6309
Email: cbn@ncb.org.uk

Winston’s wish Family Line;
telephone help and advice;
Tel: 08452 03 04 05
Email: info@winstonswish.org.uk
Or for their website see www.winstonswish.org.uk
For teenagers see www.riprap.org.uk