

Preparing Your Child to Attend the Funeral of a Friend

While many children are initially exposed to the rituals associated with funerals through the deaths of older relatives, the first experience for other children may be through the death of a friend or peer. And although burial rituals are obviously tied to culture, ethnicity, and religion and reflect many variations in the actual activities that take place, there is generally a consistency in the concerns children experience about attending funeral events.

Unfortunately for parents, children may not be able to articulate these concerns. Even teenagers may be embarrassed to acknowledge their uneasiness about going to funeral activities. So here are some simple guidelines to help you sensitively broach a conversation about funeral attendance and understand and address what may be your child's unspoken concerns:

1. First, defuse your own anxiety about talking about death and funerals by remembering that most of your child's concerns come from being exposed to an unfamiliar situation.

While there may certainly be questions about what happens when we die, this does not have to be that kind of conversation. This is simply a way of helping prepare your child for another new life experience. If you frame the conversation in this context, it doesn't become such a big deal, and it fits in more easily with more common parenting discussions.

2. In any unknown situation, understanding what will happen is the easiest way to feel prepared. Describe what the experience will be like in as much detail as possible. Consider saying something like what this parent explained to her middle school son:

"When we go into the funeral home, there will be a book at the door where we can sign our names so Jamie's family will know we came to visit. We'll probably have to wait in a long line because lots of other people will be there, too. In the front of the room there'll be this big box that's called a casket. That's where Jamie's body will be. The top of the casket may be open so people who want to see Jamie for one last time can go and say goodbye. If you'd like to do that we can, but it's not something we have to do. The casket may be closed, with lots of flowers on top of it. Jamie's family will be in the front of the room and everyone will walk past them and tell them how sad they are that Jamie died. Some people will tell them a story about Jamie—how much they liked him, 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. There will probably be lots of pictures of Jamie and his family and friends around the room and, if you want, we can take a look at these before we leave. Do you have any questions?"

This step-by-step review of the process paints a mental picture that allows your child to mentally rehearse attendance at the actual event. The anxiety and worry about the unknown will be immediately diminished when your child enters the funeral home and sees the same picture you have described. This behavioral rehearsal works well for younger children, but even older children can benefit from similar explanations.

3. Acknowledge worries about looking silly or saying something stupid by making them universal and providing an example of what your child can say. "You know, most people worry about saying something silly or stupid at funerals because it's so hard to know the right things to say or do. The best rule is to keep it simple. 'I'm sorry for your loss' or 'I'm sorry Jamie died' is absolutely enough!"

4. Funerals, especially those of children, tend to be emotional events, and children may worry that they'll be upset. Be honest; validate the feeling but outline an escape. "You know, a lot of people get upset at funerals—that's why there are always a lot of boxes of tissues at funeral homes. What happened is very sad, so crying is a really normal reaction and most people are so caught up in their own feelings that they're really not paying any attention to anyone else. But I'll carry some extra tissues with me just in case you or I need one. And if you change your mind about staying, just let me know and we can leave at any time."

5. For whatever reason, some children may balk at going to funeral events. Let it be. Being forced to attend changes the event into an unnecessary power struggle. There are lots of ways to offer support and condolence to the bereaved family, so simply suggest something else, like writing a short sympathy card.

6. Accompany your child. Having your support at an unfamiliar, emotional event like a funeral helps model an important life skill—how being together at a time of sadness helps get us through. If you can, pair your attendance at the event with something nurturing, like a stop on the way home to get a snack or a treat.

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