



Should Your Child Attend the Funeral or Memorial Service?

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

Your child's age and developmental level

Although there is no minimum age requirement to attend a memorial service, you should consider a child's age when deciding if they should be included. A child's developmental age impacts their understanding of the finality of death and informs what death means to them. Young children under the age of five may not grasp that death is final. Avoid euphemisms like "in a better place," "lost," or "went to sleep," as such phrases can be confusing, scary or misinterpreted by children, even though they may comfort an adult. Concrete language and terms like "death," "dead," and "died" help younger children understand the meaning and finality of death.

Your child's relationship to the deceased

Children should have an opportunity for closure after a death, whether at the funeral, memorial service, or at another ceremony created specifically for them. However, a child should not be forced to attend the funeral or memorial service, and they may have strong feelings about attending or forgoing a memorial based on how they knew the deceased. What was your child's relationship to the deceased? Were they a primary caregiver, a trusted mentor, or a close friend, or did your child rarely interact with the deceased person? Does your child view their relationship with the deceased as significant?

Anticipate your child's needs through planning and preparation

With preparation and planning, you can create comfort for your child. Before talking about the funeral or memorial service, gather as many details as possible and share them in age-appropriate language so your child knows what to expect. You may choose to read books that explain funerals, visit the site where the ceremony will take place, review the events that will take place during the service, and explain language that will be used during the service. Consider any religious and cultural customs that may occur at the service, especially if they are unfamiliar to your child. Prepare your child 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, you may assign a friend or family member your child trusts to give them support during the event. If your child needs to leave the service at any time, instruct your child to tell the assigned friend or family member. This plan should be discussed and communicated ahead of time with your child. If children choose not to attend the funeral, their decision should be respected and other options for closure can be created with them.

Seek support and guidance

Family members, friends, and trusted professionals can provide support and guidance as you and your child make your decision. Be open and honest as you communicate with your child, and let your child take the lead as you consider their age, development, personality, and relationship with the deceased. Grief is a journey filled with ups and downs, and everyone copes with it the best they can along the way.

A tip sheet from

Uplift Center for Grieving Children

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