

Kids and Funerals

By adulthood, most of us have attended a funeral. But what is a funeral like for a child or teenager who unexpectedly loses a parent, sibling, grandparent or friend? And how do children say goodbye? What do they need, and how can families and funeral services address their needs?

Too often, kids feel like the “forgotten mourners.” They are seen but not heard or spoken to at a funeral. Often what they get is a pat on the head, or hugs from adults they don’t even know. Many adults still wonder if it’s a good idea to include children in funerals at all. While every family has its own traditions and beliefs, and these will play a strong role in funeral and memorial service planning and decisions, parents may not be aware that one of the most helpful things they can do for their children during this time is to give them choices. Children appreciate having choices as much as adults do. They have opinions, and want to be valued enough to be allowed to offer them. And they don’t like to be left out of anything, even a funeral. It is a meaningful and important experience for children to have the opportunity to say goodbye to the person who died in a way that feels right to them. Saying goodbye is never easy, but it helps bring a sense of finality to the death that is helpful in the healing process.

To attend or not to attend the funeral

“They didn’t let me go to the funeral. They said I was too young. I’m still mad.” - Paul, 8.

People often wonder at what age a child should attend a funeral. Age is not the most important consideration. Generally speaking, young children don’t seem to have the fear of the deceased or dead bodies adults think they do. What works well is to invite children or teenagers to the funeral, without forcing them to make a particular decision. Children who are not allowed to attend a funeral may feel they didn’t get their chance to say goodbye. On the other hand, children who were forced to attend a funeral may feel resentful. Children should not be criticized if they don’t want to attend the funeral. They may regret the decisions they make, but they won’t have the added issue of resentment for not being allowed to make their own choice.

In order to make their choice, children need explanations and information about what a funeral is and what is going to happen. After a death, the world as they know it is completely changed. Additional surprises and unfamiliar situations can complicate the grieving process. Not unlike adults, kids like to be filled in on the basics of who, what, where, when and why. Kids also expect us to be clear, direct and concrete in our explanations. Teenagers appreciate this too. They are experts at discerning when adults are beating around the bush. When explaining the events of a funeral to child, it’s best to “tell it like it is.” Typical aspects of the funeral that may be discussed include:

Who... will be at the funeral or memorial service?

What... is going to happen?

Where... will the service take place?

When... will the funeral happen?

Why... are we doing this?

What happens, or doesn't happen, at a funeral will be remembered forever by a child. Parents and other caregivers have the opportunity to influence a child's experience by including children in the one way they most deserve and request: informed choice.

These lessons have been adapted from the book What About The Kids: Understanding Their Needs in Funeral Planning and Services. To order a copy of the book, visit or contact The Dougy Center, 503-775-5683.