

Explaining funerals, burial and cremation to children

As adults, we may assume that a child will know what a funeral is and why we have them. In reality, most children do not have much knowledge of funerals, unless they have previously experienced the death of someone they know. Any information that they already have has probably come from the media or via overheard conversations, which are often misunderstood by children. This information sheet is based on the experiences of some of the families we support.

A good starting point is to talk about what a funeral is and its purpose. What you say will be influenced by your culture, beliefs or religion, if you have one. The following are just suggestions to give you the confidence to talk about funerals in a way that feels right for you and your children. Do first check that the child understands what being dead means. A child who has not quite grasped the concept of 'no life' may be distressed by the thought of someone being buried or burnt. See our information sheet Explaining to young children that someone has died.

When talking to children about any aspect of death, it is important to be honest; use the word 'dead' rather than 'lost' or 'gone', and use simple language that a young child will understand.

Taking a child to a funeral

A very young child, toddler, or even a baby can go to a funeral with the rest of the family. Although they may not understand what is happening at the time, when they are older they will appreciate that they were a part of this important event along with everyone else. Ask someone close to your child to join you in case they get upset or become restless and want to go out. It may be hard to have to deal with your own grief and theirs. Take along a favourite toy or book to occupy them. Let whoever is organising the funeral know that you will be taking young children.

Older children can be given the choice to attend. As long as a child is prepared for what is going to happen and what they will see, attending the funeral will be a helpful experience. None of the bereaved children we have worked with at Child Bereavement UK has regretted going to the funeral. Those who were not given the option deeply resented not being included, despite the decision not to take them being made with the best of intentions.

If your children choose not to attend, remember that there are other alternatives such as a private family farewell or doing something special to remember the person who has died.

Involving children in the planning

If someone close has died, try to involve the children as much as possible. This helps them to feel included and creates opportunities to share thoughts and feelings. Young children may choose to make a drawing or card which could be placed on the coffin. Ask them if they have a favourite poem or a song they would like to be included. If possible, before the funeral, take the children to the location where the funeral will be taking place, for a quick look. This will help them to feel more secure and better prepared because they will know what to expect.

What is a funeral and why do we have them?

Here are some suggestions of words you may wish to use when talking to children about a funeral. These are only suggestions and you will know best what your child will understand:

'When someone dies, we have a special ceremony called a funeral. Because Granny has died, we are going to have one just for her. At the funeral, everyone can get together to remember things Granny did, to think about how much we loved her, and to say a very special goodbye to her. We are going to have the funeral at... on... You can have a think about if you would like to be there. You do not have to decide right now and if you change your mind that is OK. You can ask any questions you want and I will try to answer or if I don't know, we can ask the man who is helping us, who is called a Funeral Director.'

What happens at a funeral?

'At the funeral, Granny's body will be in a special box called a coffin. The coffin will have a lid on it and Granny's dead body will be inside the coffin. Remember, because she is dead and no longer alive, Granny's body doesn't work and she does not need her body any more. The coffin will be at the front and it will be made of brown wood with shiny handles.' (Describe whatever applies.)

At the funeral, we will sing some hymns (songs). You can help us to choose which ones, if you like. We will also ask people to say something about Granny, things such as how she loved growing flowers and how she wasn't very good at singing but sang anyway. Can you think of any stories that we can tell about her? Some people get very sad at funerals and cry a little, some people cry a lot and others don't cry at all. It doesn't matter who does what.'

This may well be as much information as the child needs for now. However, they may ask about what happens afterwards. How you reply will depend on whether there is to be a burial or cremation.

Burial

'At the end of the funeral, the coffin will be taken to the graveyard (cemetery). In the graveyard (cemetery) a very deep hole will have been dug. This is called a grave. The coffin will be gently lowered into the grave and covered up with earth. Eventually, grass will grow on top of it.

When we feel ready, we can put a headstone on the grave. This will have Granny's name on it so that everyone will know where her body is buried. We can visit the grave sometimes to think about and remember Granny.'

Cremation

What you say about cremation needs careful thought and will be influenced by the age of the child. Some children will be frightened by the use of the words 'burnt' or 'burning' as they associate fire with fear and danger. Two approaches are suggested below, one less direct than the other:

'Granny's body will be turned into soft powdery ashes at the crematorium. The ashes are then put into a pot called an urn. Some people scatter the ashes somewhere very special to the person who has died. Or we can bury the ashes in the ground, but we do not have to decide this now. We can decide together what we want to do with Granny's ashes.

At the end of the funeral, some curtains will be drawn around the coffin and we will not see it again. After everyone has gone, the coffin, with the dead body inside, is put into a special, very hot oven to be burnt and turned into ash. We do not watch this bit. The ashes are then put into a special pot called an urn. Some people scatter the ashes somewhere very special to the person who has died. Or we can bury them in the ground but we do not have to decide this now. We can decide together what we want to do with Granny's ashes.'

Visiting the burial place

Some children find it comforting to visit the grave or place where ashes are scattered. Others view graveyards and cemeteries as frightening or unwelcoming places. Reassure your child that films and television programmes that show graveyards as scary places, full of ghosts, are pretend and not the real thing.

Others can find visiting the grave bewildering, especially if they are still a bit confused about what being dead means, and where dead bodies go. If your beliefs support the concept of Heaven, this can be comforting as children, religious or not, associate Heaven with safety and peace. However, do make sure that you say Granny has died. See our information sheet: ***Explaining to young children that someone has died***

Ask the child if they would like to visit the graveside, and if so, suggest that they leave some flowers or a memento. Some families combine the visit with a walk or some other activity. This helps to normalize the visit. A child who clearly does not want to go should not be forced.

Suggested resources to help with talking to children

Available from bookshops or online booksellers, unless otherwise stated.

Someone I Know Has Died

Trish Phillips

This activity book is designed to be used with adult help by very young children who need assistance to understand what being dead means, what we do, and how we might feel when someone dies. Some pages are interactive in ways familiar to children.

Someone Very Important Has Just Died

Mary Turner

A simple, short booklet with words to help you explain death, burials, cremations and what happens at a funeral.

What Happened to Daddy's Body?

Elke & Alex Barber

Aimed at young children this book sensitively and honestly explains what happens after death. Based on real conversations, it aims to help children understand cremation, burial and the spreading of ashes.

Further resources and/or references are available from Child Bereavement UK, upon request.