



Should Children Attend Funerals?

By Sasha J. Mudlaff, M.A.

It is very important that children not be left out of the family grieving process. This could include involvement in the arrangements, viewing and/or funeral service of the person who has died. Although a child may not completely understand the ceremony surrounding the death, being involved helps the child to establish a sense of comfort and the understanding that life goes on even though someone loved has died. Not allowing a child to participate isolates the child from the rest of the family, perhaps even hindering his or her grieving process. On the other hand, a child should never be *forced* to participate. Explain to them what will happen at the visitation and funeral, answering whatever questions they may have. A child who is given honest, up front information will likely feel more comfortable participating.

If the body will be viewed at the visitation and/or funeral, let the child know this ahead of time. Explain what the casket and body will look like. If cremation has or will be taking place, explain what cremation means and what will happen to the cremated remains*. Reinforce to the child that because the person is dead, they cannot feel anything during the cremation process. It is also a good idea to let the child know that at the visitation/funeral there will be people showing many emotions; some people may cry and others may not show their feelings at all. It is important to remember that children need to see the adults in their lives expressing their grief. This gives the child "permission" to grieve as well.

Many parents are concerned about the possibility of their child acting up or disturbing others during the funeral service. Explain that there are acceptable and unacceptable ways to behave at funerals and talk about it with the child. If this is still a concern, perhaps taking the child to the funeral home for the family visitation, usually a less formal time, is more appropriate. This gives them more of an opportunity to ask questions and have them answered as well. It is always a good idea to designate a trusted friend or family member to be "in charge" of the children while the family is at the funeral home. This person can then not only keep an eye on the children's whereabouts, but also be available to answer questions. This relieves the parents of such responsibility at a time when they may need to focus on their own grief reactions.

Give the child the option to do something special such as draw a picture or write a letter to the person who has died to be placed in the casket before, during, or after the funeral service. Or perhaps the child would like to select a favorite photograph of them to have on display or to place in the casket.

Children's grief expert, Dr. Alan Wolfelt says: *"The funeral, a ritual that has been with us since the beginning of time, is here to help us embrace the life that was lived and support each other as we go forward. As caring adults, we will service our children well to introduce them to the value of coming together when someone we love dies."*

* See Mudlaff handout "Explaining Cremation to Children"

