

# Helping Children with Funerals

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

## The Adult as Role Model and Helper

A child you care about is grieving. If you, too, loved the person who died, you are now faced with the difficult but critical task of helping both yourself and the child heal. Throughout the coming months you will be both a role model and a helper to the bereaved child in your care.

One of the first opportunities for you and the child to express your grief is the funeral. This article will help you understand the importance of the funeral not only for you and other adult mourners, but for the children. It will also offer suggestions for guiding children through this important ritual in a healthy, life-affirming way.

## The Funeral: For Adults And Children

Most of the rituals in our society focus on children. What would birthdays or Christmas be without kids? Unfortunately, the funeral ritual, whose purpose is to help bereaved people begin to heal, is not seen as a ritual for kids. Too often, children are not included in the funeral because adults want to protect them. The funeral is painful, they reason, so I will shelter the children from this pain.

Yes, funerals can be very painful, but children have the same right and privilege to participate in them as adults do. Funerals are important to survivors of any age because they:

- help them acknowledge that someone has died.
- provide a structure to support and assist them through their initial period of mourning.
- provide a time to honor, remember and affirm the life of the person who died.
- allow for a "search for meaning" within the context of each person's religious or philosophical values.

## Explaining the What...

Unless they have attended one before, children don't know what to expect from a funeral. You can help by explaining what will happen before, during and after the ceremony. Let the child's questions and natural curiosity guide the discussion.

Give as many specifics as the child seems interested in hearing. You might tell her how the room will look, who will be coming and how long everyone will be there, for example. When possible, arrange for the child to visit the funeral home before the funeral. This allows her more freedom to react and talk openly about feelings and concerns.

If the body will be viewed either at a visitation or at the funeral itself, let the child know this in advance. Explain what the casket and the body will look like. If the body is to be cremated, explain what cremation means and what will happen to the ashes. Be sure the child understands that because the person is dead, he doesn't feel pain or anything at all during cremation.

Also help children anticipate that they will see people expressing a wide variety of emotions at the funeral. They will see tears, straight faces and laughter. If adults are able to openly show feelings, including crying, children will feel much more free to express a sense of loss at their own level.





## **And the Whys...**

Help the child understand why we have funerals. Children need to know that the funeral is a time of sadness because someone has died, a time to honor the person who died, a time to help comfort and support each other and a time to affirm that life goes on.

One why children seem easily to embrace is that funerals are a time to say goodbye. And saying goodbye helps us all acknowledge that the person we loved is gone and cannot come back. If the body is to be viewed, tell the child that seeing the body helps people say goodbye and that he may touch the person he loved once last time.

Now is also a good time to explain to the child what spiritual significance the funeral has for you and your family. This can be difficult, for even adults have a hard time articulating their beliefs about life and death. One guideline: children have difficulty understanding abstractions, so it is best to use concrete terms when talking about religious concepts.

## **Include Children in the Ritual**

When appropriate, you might invite children not only to attend the funeral but to take part in it. Bereaved children feel like their feelings "matter" when they can share a favorite memory or read a special poem as part of the funeral. Shyer children can participate by lighting a candle or placing something special (a momento or a photo, for example) in the casket. And many children feel more included when they are invited to help plan the funeral service.

## **Encourage, But Don't Force**

Children should be encouraged to attend and participate in funerals, but never forced. When they are lovingly guided through the process, however, most children want to attend. Offer the reticent child options: "You can come to the visitation today with everyone else or if you want, I can take just you this morning so you can say goodbye in private."

## **Understand and Accept the Child's Way of Mourning**

Do not prescribe to children what they should feel or for how long-particularly during the funeral. Remember that children often need to accept their grief in doses, and that outward signs of grief may come and go. It is not unusual, for example, for children to want to roughhouse with their cousins during the visitation or play video games right after the funeral. Instead of punishing this behavior, you should respect the child's need to be a child during this extraordinarily difficult time. If the child's behavior is disturbing others, explain that there are acceptable and unacceptable ways to act at funerals and that you expect the child to consider the feelings of other mourners-including yours.

## **Be There**

Being there for the bereaved child-before, during and after the funeral-is the most important thing you can do to help. When we grieve, we all need support from others. But grieving children, especially, need to know they are not alone.

Physical closeness and comfort are reassuring to children during times of distress. What you say may not be as important as a touch on the shoulder, a hand on the back or a shoulder to cry on.

Remember to be a good observer of children's behavior. Be patient and available as you allow children to teach you what the funeral is like for them.





## **Funerals: A Final Word**

An anonymous author once wrote, "When words are inadequate, have a ritual." For children and adults alike, death often leaves us speechless. 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 serve our children well to introduce them to the value of coming together when someone we love dies.

### **The Language of Funerals**

Remember to use simple, concrete language when talking to children about death. Here are some suggestions for explaining funeral terms:

#### **Ashes** (*also "cremains"*)

What is left of a dead body after cremation. Looks like ashes from a fire.

#### **Burial**

Placing the body (which is inside a casket) into the ground.

#### **Casket**

A special box for burying a dead body.

#### **Cemetery**

A place where many dead bodies are buried.

#### **Cremation**

Putting the dead body into a room with lots of heat until it turns into ashes.

#### **Dead**

When a person's body stops working. It doesn't see, hear, feel, eat, breathe, etc. anymore.

#### **Funeral**

A time when friends and families get together to say goodbye and remember the person who died.

#### **Funeral home**

A place where bodies are kept until they are buried.

#### **Grave**

The hole in the ground where the body is buried at the cemetery.

#### **Hearse**

The special car that takes the dead body in the casket to the grave at the cemetery.

#### **Obituary**

A short article in the paper that tells about the person who died.

#### **Pallbearer**

The people who help carry the casket at the funeral.

#### **Viewing**

The time when people can see the body of the person who died.





## About the Author

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., C.T. is an internationally noted author, educator and grief counselor. He serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is on the faculty at the University of Colorado Medical School's Department of Family Medicine.

Past recipient of the Association of Death Education and Counseling's Death Educator Award, Dr. Wolfelt is an educational consultant to hospices, hospitals, schools, universities, funeral homes and a variety of community agencies across North America. Perhaps best known for his model of "companioning" versus treating the bereaved, Alan is committed to helping people mourn well so they can live well and love well.

Also a respected author, Dr. Wolfelt writes the "Children and Grief" column for *Bereavement* magazine. His many bestselling books on grief are listed under *Bookstore* on his Website. He has appeared on, and is a frequent resource for the media. Appearances include *Oprah Winfrey*, *The Larry King Show*, *The NBC Today Show* and *Nick News*.

For additional resources, please visit the Center for Loss & Life Transition website at [www.centerforloss.com](http://www.centerforloss.com).



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