

PATHWAYS CENTER *for* GRIEF & LOSS

WHEN THERE IS A FUNERAL OR MEMORIAL SERVICE... HELPING CHILDREN COPE

When a family member dies, anyone who cared about that person will grieve. Even very young children will be affected by the loss. They need the opportunity to understand and to mourn. The adults around the child may also be struggling to cope with the loss. This may be the most difficult experience a child has ever been through. They need to feel included and a part of the mourning process. Sheltering them from it, especially over time, can be more harmful than helpful. Children need support and help in understanding and adjusting to a close family member or friend.

Funerals are a time to honor and remember loved ones. It is a time that allows families to openly mourn and comfort one another. If you are comforted by your spiritual faith, share it with your child. In this way, he or she may also be reassured. Perhaps share with them one of your earlier experiences with a funeral. By talking openly you are showing that you are available to answer their questions and provide support.

Questions commonly asked by parents and caregivers:

- **Do you think my child should attend the funeral? Won't it just be confusing and upsetting to sit through?**

No child should be forced to attend, but if old enough to understand, it's best to give the child the choice of attending. If a child wants to attend or participate, their wish should be supported. This could include writing a note to place in the casket, a poem or a memory that can be read, or participating in the service in some other way. Even a very young child will benefit from attending a funeral, as it helps the child begin to grasp the concept of death and its permanence. The child will also learn that he or she is among many who are grieving this loss. It is a time that allows families to openly mourn and comfort one another. If you are comforted by your spiritual faith, share it with your child. In this way, he or she may also be reassured.

If your child has never been to a funeral home, take the time to sit down and explain its purpose. Talk about what it will be like, who will be there, what takes place before and afterwards. Clarify whether it will be a viewing, a funeral, or a memorial service. If the body was cremated, say so. Even many adults do not fully understand this process. If there will be a committal service, explain its purpose and what that will be like. It is best to have someone accompany the child who is not deeply grieving. In this way, that person can be more emotionally available to the child to provide support, answer questions, or even leave if the child changes his or her mind about being there.

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- **I'm so upset myself. How do I talk about it to my child? What should I say?**

Be direct. Use simple clear explanations. It's okay if you to cry with your child. In this manner, he or she is shown that crying is a natural way to express sadness. This helps your child be more comfortable expressing feelings, whatever they may be. Although it is a sad time and there are tears, remember that tears are part of the healing process.

- **Won't it scare my child to see the deceased?**

Viewing the deceased can be helpful for a child in the same way that it is for an adult. It often helps -- in a way nothing else can -- to fully grasp that the death has occurred. Since many find that the person appears to be "at peace" at a viewing, this can be more comforting than you might expect it to be.

The definition of the word bereaved is "to be robbed" or "to have something taken away." A child whose loved one has died is already bereaved. We should also not deprive that child of the opportunity to mourn this loss.

Call a Pathways Center for Grief & Loss counselor at (717) 391-2413 for more information or to address your situation and concerns.



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