



Should Children Attend a Funeral or Memorial Service?

Attendance at a memorial service or funeral is a critical issue for bereaved children. The decision must be made quickly following a death. The decision can't be undone once the service has occurred, so careful planning and consideration is critical. Our experience with children has been that children who do not attend have great regrets for many years about not attending. Those who were not given the option of attending struggle with feelings of anger and betrayal about being deprived of the opportunity.

Children should be given a choice about whether or not they want to attend a funeral or memorial service, but they must be given enough information to make that choice.

- Explain everything that will happen at the funeral or memorial service. Remember, the entire experience will be new to a child, and there are many customs that can seem very weird and scary.
- Let the child know that it will be sad, and there may be many adults who cry. Seeing adults cry can be unsettling to children, so reassure them that crying is normal when we miss someone, and everyone will be okay. Reassure the child that it is okay if he cries.
- Assure the child that you or another familiar adult (family member, close adult friend, etc.) will be there with them at all times.
- Give the child an opportunity to participate in the service if he would like to. Ideas for participation include:
 - Placing a special article, note, or flower in the casket or displaying it beside a photo.
 - Sharing special memories that can be read by someone else at the service.
 - Being an honorary pallbearer.
 - If the child is old enough, he may want to sing a special song, read something special, or share favorite memories. If the child wants to do this, adults should provide a great deal of assistance and practice.
 - Children find releasing balloons at the end of the service to be very meaningful and a special way to end the service.

If the child decides to attend the service:

- Ensure a caring adult is with him at all times to comfort, reassure, and answer questions. If possible, the adult should be someone who will not be overcome emotionally and can hear and answer the child's questions.
- If the child becomes too uncomfortable or emotional, he should be taken out of the service. Do not make him to feel bad about not being able to stay.
- After the service, talk to the child about what he saw, questions he has or things he did not understand.

