



# Understanding Children's Grief

A common question asked by many adults is, "Should a child be allowed to attend a funeral?" The answer is yes. Like adults, children recognise the need to celebrate the life of a loved one. Attending a funeral allows a child to be a part of the family at a time when they need love and attention the most. If the child is leery of the funeral, you can arrange a private moment before or after the service for the child to say goodbye. The important thing is to not isolate the child from the situation.

Knowing what to expect at the funeral is very reassuring for children. Be honest and clear when explaining the details. Remember, children take things very literally, so try not to be vague in your explanations. For young children, simple statements are sufficient. For example, explaining that a funeral is a way to say goodbye or that a casket is a "nice box that holds the body" will help remove the mystery and uncertainty surrounding a funeral.

Years from now, children may not remember specific detail of a funeral they attended. But by participating, they'll take away something even more important – that they played an active role in celebrating the life of their loved one.

## **In the world of a child loss can be devastating**

The death of a loved one is a painful and confusing experience for anyone at any age. For a child though, it can be especially traumatic and can present special challenges for parents, grandparents and other adults in a child's life. Children look to adults for support, answers and advice while they work their way through grief and try to develop an understanding of death.

## Signs of Grief

Each child's reaction to death will be unique and may be experienced on many different levels.

Signs of grief can include:

- Acting out
- Fatigue or lack of energy
- Changes in grades
- Sleep disturbances
- Headaches, stomach aches or skin rashes
- Difficulty concentrating or focusing
- Regressive behaviour, such as thumb sucking, bed wetting or clinging

Ultimately, it is impossible to protect children from the pain of losing someone they love. Trying to hide the death from a child will only delay his or her inevitable realisation that the person is no longer a part of their life. It is better to include your children in the mourning experience and teach them a healthy way to deal with their feelings.

## Talking to a Child about Death

As hard as it may be to break bad news to a child, honesty is the best policy. A white lie, however well intended can confuse and unsettle a child when they eventually learn the truth. Likewise, explaining death to a child in euphemisms – “Grandpa went on a long trip,” for example – may instil fear in going on vacation. Difficult though it may be, it's better to be clear, direct and upfront, explaining death in straightforward phrase like “dead means a person's body has stopped working and won't work anymore.”

It's important that children be allowed to share in the grieving process. Encourage children to cry out their grief and talk about their thoughts and feelings about death. Be sure to share your grief too. Seeing you grieve will let children know that it is normal and healthy to cry and feel sad after death. Also, take time to listen. Children, too, need to talk about loss and the feelings connected to it.

Perhaps the most important form of support you can offer is continuous love and assurance. Children need to know they are loved and feel secure. By being present and available during the mourning process, you can help the child bear the pain. So can other adults in the family. Don't be afraid to turn to a family friend or another trusted adult to help provide much needed comfort, concern and care.

***“I was 8 when my father died. It was very difficult, but I remember being at his funeral and hearing my family and friends talk about him and it made me very proud. After that funeral, I knew things were going to be all right.”***



## Five Ways to Help a Grieving Child

1. Be there for children. Listen when they need to talk and hug them when they need comfort.
2. Share fond memories about your loved one with them and encourage them to share their own memories.
3. Encourage the child to draw a picture with a letter to your loved one, which could even be incorporated into the funeral.
4. Frame a photograph of your loved one for the child or give them another memento by which to remember your loved one (such as an often-read book, a favourite pin, etc.)
5. Involve children in the funeral, invite them to read a poem or letter they have written or sing or play a song during the service.

**If you would like information about helping children through their grief, talk to your FUNERA funeral director or visit [www.funera.sydney](http://www.funera.sydney) and look for other FUNERA brochures that provide information and guidance on topics including planning a meaningful funeral service, healing after the loss of a loved one, understanding cremation and planning your funeral in advance.**

*"My grandpa died when I was 10. At his funeral, all of us grandkids placed a yellow rose on his casket. It made me feel important and connected to my grandpa and, years later, provided a lasting memory!"*



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