

Helping Children Cope at a Wake, Funeral, or Memorial Service

By Cynthia Clark

How do I explain a wake or funeral?

This is a special time when people get together to say goodbye to someone they love who has died.

-How do I explain a memorial service?

This is a special time for people to gather after the death of a loved one or friend. Note: The body is usually not present, unless in cremated form. There may be ashes in an urn or box or there may simply be flowers, a special object or pictures to view.

- Should I let my child go?

You know your child the best. You may find it helpful to inform them where they will be going and why. Let them know that you would like this to be a family event and then let them make the choice.

- What if my child doesn't want to go?

Children should never be forced to attend. Remind them that this is a special time when people get together to say goodbye to someone they love. Ask them what their fears may be about attending and try to clarify any misconceptions. Let them know that there is usually a reception or big meal after the service.

- How do I explain the casket?

Let your child know that a casket is a very special box and that their loved one will be lying down inside of it. It is often helpful to draw a rectangle shape and then have your child draw the deceased person inside. Explain what they will look like and whether the casket will be open or closed. You may want to check with someone about what the deceased is wearing, what the casket looks like and what will be surrounding the person and the casket. Children can process the information you give them by drawing and coloring the flowers, a "kneeler", or special objects.

- What if the casket is open?

Discuss what a dead body looks like and feels like. Mention that the body may look like it is sleeping, but remind them that dead is not the same as sleeping. Dispel any myths that children have about dead bodies coming back to life. Remind them that the body has stopped working forever and that the body will not move. Let them know that the body may feel cold and hard and that this is because the person's blood stopped moving when their body stopped working and that's what usually keeps our bodies warm and soft. Let

the children know that it is alright to touch or kiss their loved one, but do not insist that they do so. Keep in mind that if the casket is open, the lower half of the casket may be closed. If this is so, your child might think that the legs are missing. Be sure to clarify this misconception or let them see for themselves.

- What if the casket is closed?

Be sure to emphasize that the person's body is inside the casket. You may also want to talk about why the casket is closed because of religious beliefs, tradition or personal reasons. It is not necessary to get into details with children if it is closed due to an extreme change in appearance. Ask if they have any questions about why the casket is closed and answer them as simply as you can. A special object or note can often be placed inside the casket by the funeral director.

- How do I explain cremation?

Begin by reminding your child that a dead body cannot feel pain. Limit the amount of information you give depending on their age. Let them know that their loved one will be lying down in a special box that will be gently placed in a special machine that will turn the body into ash. Wait to see if your child asks you more questions before proceeding. You may have to add that a very hot heat turns the body into ash. Never use the word fire! This image can be very frightening to children. If you choose to keep the ashes, explain that they will be kept in a special box, container or vase called an urn. Prepare the child if the ashes will be scattered now, later or kept in a special place.

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