



Elizabeth's Smile

Supporting grieving children and their caregivers.

# BASICS *of* GRIEF

You are here because someone you care about is grieving the loss of someone special. We are so sorry for the loss you have faced, and we are also grateful that you are here.

Because you are reading this, we know that you've sought resources and support to bring your best to your relationship with a grieving child, while you also grieve a painful loss. While you can't take away the grief or change what happened, know that you are a gift to the child during this time, and can be for the rest of your life.

We hope the suggestions, information, tips, and ideas give you some clarity and confidence. The most important thing to know is that you already have within you what every child needs: your love, presence, and care.



With Care.

**The Elizabeth's Smile Team**



# Table of Contents

**4–6**

Children's understanding of death at different ages

**7–10**

Explaining to young children that someone has died

**11–14**

How children and young people grieve

**15–20**

What helps grieving children and young people

**21–22**

Grieving before a loss

**23–29**

Preparing children for funerals



# Children's understanding of death at different ages

## Infants and toddlers

Babies and young children have no understanding of the concept of death yet. However, long before they are able to talk, babies can sense and react to changes in their environment – specifically related to separation from one of their primary caregivers, who they rely on for all aspects of care and sustenance.

Up to the age of 6 months, babies may experience a sense of abandonment when a caregiver dies, which often results in increased crying, protesting, and disruption in sleep and feeding routines. From around the age of 8 months or so; infants and toddlers begin to develop a 'mental image' of the person who died and have a sense of 'missing them'. Infants and toddlers at this age may cry more or become more withdrawn; they may lose interest in toys or food and, as they develop motor skills and language, may call out for or search for the person who died. You can help by maintaining their typical routines as much as possible in addition to providing them with emotional and physical soothing when they express their distress.

## Preschoolers

Young children at this age begin to use the word 'dead' and develop an awareness that this concept is different from being alive. Children of this age do not understand abstract concepts like 'forever' and cannot grasp that death is permanent. Their limited understanding may lead to an apparent lack of reaction when told about a death, and they may ask many questions about where the person who has died is and when that person will come back. Children at this age expect the person to return.

Young children tend to interpret what they are told in a literal and concrete way; therefore, it is important to avoid offering explanations of death such as 'lost', 'gone away' or 'gone to sleep' that may cause misunderstandings and confusion. Provide honest answers to their questions but do not feel you have to tell them everything in detail or all at once. Information can build over time.





After a loved one dies, preschool-aged children may have disrupted sleep, changes in appetite, less interest in play and may become more anxious about separation even when being left with familiar adults. There may also be regression in previously acquired skills such as language (i.e., reverting back to baby talk) or toilet training (i.e., wetting the bed).

## **School-age children**

Between the ages of 5 and 7 years, children gradually begin to develop an understanding that death is permanent and irreversible and that the person who has died will not return. Children who have been bereaved when they were younger will likely re-process what has happened as they develop awareness of the finality of death.

Children's imagination and 'magical thinking' at this age can mean that some children may believe that their thoughts or actions caused the death. Not being given sufficient information in age-appropriate language can lead them to 'make-up' and fill in the gaps in their knowledge. Children increasingly become aware that death is an inevitable part of life that happens to all living things. As a result, they can become anxious about their own, and others', health and safety.

Children at this age benefit from honest answers to their questions that can be built on over time, and opportunities to express their feelings. They also greatly benefit from reassurance that nothing they said, did, or thought caused their person's death.

## Teenagers

Adolescence is a time of great change and grief often impacts the developmental task of moving from dependence to independence – moving from familial ties to increased involvement with peers. It can, therefore, be difficult for teenagers to ask for support while trying to demonstrate independence. Young people do not like to feel different from their peers, and being a grieving young person can be isolating.

Teenagers will have a more mature understanding of the concept of death but often have their own beliefs and strongly held views, and may challenge the beliefs and explanations offered by others.

Some young people may respond to a death by becoming more withdrawn, some may 'act out' their distress while others cope with the awareness of their own mortality through risk-taking behavior. Others may take on adult responsibilities and become 'the caregiver' for those around them. Keeping to the usual boundaries of acceptable behavior can be reassuring for bereaved young people.

Young people who have been bereaved at an earlier age may re-process their grief as they think about and plan for their future and fully understand the impact of life without the person who died.

# Explaining to young children that someone has died

Talking to a young child about death and dying is incredibly difficult and can feel just too hard to do. This is compounded by our natural instinct to protect children from the tough things in life. In order to make sense of what has happened, children need honest information and a way of understanding their world. Children benefit from direct, simple, and developmentally-informed language when learning about difficult topics.

With support, children can deal with the truth, no matter how difficult or traumatic; what is often the most inadvertently challenging is when children pick up on topics they are 'not supposed to know' about. The following are invitations and suggestions to support you with examples of what to say, how much to say, and how to talk about hard things. The words suggested are not meant to be a script. They are frameworks to adapt as needed for your unique family and situation.

## **When is it best to tell them that someone has died and where should it be done?**

While it may go against adults' protective instincts, children benefit from hearing the news as soon as possible. The longer the topic goes unaddressed, the greater the likelihood that children will overhear a conversation and begin to create their own way of understanding. Children are very sensitive to other people's emotions and will already know that something serious has happened, but may be unsure as to exactly what.

- The news is best heard from someone close to the child – whether that is their surviving caregiver, a grandparent, aunt/uncle, etc.
- If you are breaking the news yourself, have someone else around to support you.



- If possible, find somewhere where you will not be disturbed and during a time of day where you/your child will have opportunities to be together afterwards (i.e., not right before school or before bed).
- Everyone has different levels of comfort with physical touch – you know your child best. When delivering hard news, we encourage you to be on your child's eye level, and sitting in close proximity to them. If you/your child feel comfortable, holding their hand or rubbing their back can be, at times, soothing.

### **When talking to a child of any age, the following guidelines can be helpful, regardless of circumstance**

- Use simple words appropriate for the child's age and understanding. It is important to use the real words such as 'dead' and 'died'. Euphemisms including 'lost' or 'gone to sleep' – have the best of intentions – but often cause more confusion and distress for a child who is seeking understanding.
- When thinking about how much information to share, follow your child's lead. They will benefit from being given permission to ask questions and they will likely ask the questions that are on their mind.
- Try to answer only the question asked and avoid giving extra detail. There is a fine line between being honest and overloading a child with information they do not want or need. Information can always be added later.
- If faced with a question you find difficult or are not sure how to answer, it can be helpful to ask the child what they think. This will give you an indication of how much the child already knows and understands. It is also okay to share with your child that you don't have all the answers – and you'll be there to either find the answers with them or sit in the discomfort of not knowing together.

## How to tell a young child that someone has died

Alert the child to the fact that you have something sad to say:

- 'I have some very sad news to tell you...'
- 'Something very sad happened...'

Often initially all you need to say is that the person has died; more questions will follow when the child is ready for further explanation and information.

- 'Mommy died...'

If a person has been ill, it can be helpful to build on what the child already knows:

- 'You know last time we saw granny and she was very sick...'

Reassure the child that it is OK to ask questions about anything at all and that you will do your best to answer them honestly.

## Explaining what death means to young children

The following are suggestions for words you could use when explaining to a young child the concept of being dead. Exactly what you choose to say will depend on individual circumstances and your own beliefs. The best approach is one that works for your family and is delivered with directness, kindness, and compassion.

Concentrate on what feels right for you and the children that you are with.

- 'When somebody dies their body stops working. A dead body does not breathe because their lungs are no longer working and their heart has stopped beating.'

Because a young child can find it hard to grasp the difference between being dead and being alive, they may need some reassurance which could sound like:

- 'Because their body has stopped working, dead people do not need anything to eat or to drink and they cannot feel pain. When someone dies, it means they will not be coming back.'



On hearing the news, a child's reactions may vary from extreme distress to looking blank as if nothing has happened, or even giggling nervously – all are normal. You are likely to have to repeat this information and answer questions in subsequent days and weeks. Being asked the same questions over and over again can be extremely hard and this is the way that young children try to make sense of what has happened.

This feels hard because it is hard. Take care of yourself when preparing for, and engaging in, this conversation.





# How children and young people grieve

As adults who care for children, it is often challenging to see the little ones we love and care for in pain. While it is hard to witness, children can – and do – grieve. Children show the sadness they feel and the pain they experience just as deeply as adults, but show it in different ways. Children often need permission from the adults around them to feel their big feelings and to think about the often confusing and challenging questions on their minds. They will gradually gain the language of feelings by listening to words that you use in addition to observing how you cope with your own big feelings. Showing your grief in healthy and authentic ways will encourage them to express theirs.

Children have a limited ability to put feelings, thoughts and memories into words and tend to 'act out' with behaviors rather than express themselves verbally. A child's behavior is a guide to how they are feeling inside – which is just as true for infants and toddlers as it is for teenagers and young adults.

Children are naturally good at dipping in and out of their grief. They can be intensely sad one minute, then suddenly switch to playing happily the next. This apparent lack of sadness may lead adults to believe children are unaffected. However, this 'puddle-jumping' in and out of grief behavior is a type of safety mechanism that stops children from being overwhelmed by powerful feelings. As children get older, this instinctive 'puddle-jumping' becomes harder and teenagers may spend long periods of time in one behavior, such as being withdrawn or another behavior, such as keeping very busy.

For a young person, moving on with life might involve a hectic social schedule as their way of shutting out the pain. Or they may withdraw into themselves, rejecting offers of help and being generally very hard to communicate with. If this is the case for a young person you are supporting, try to be patient and continue to let them know that you are still there for them. However, try not to put them under pressure to talk.



## **Common responses, feelings and behaviors**

It is normal for children and young people to react strongly to the death of someone close, even if these strong feelings and behaviors look and feel far from normal. Adolescents and teenagers find it hard to show intense and difficult feelings to family members when life for them is already full of challenge and uncertainty. A child's attention span matches the amount of information they can handle at any one time. When they reach their limit of feelings that are too hard, they may switch to feelings that they can handle. For example, a child may laugh inappropriately to avoid talking about fear or sadness. How a child or young person responds to someone dying will be influenced by their age and understanding, the relationship they had with the person who died, and how that person died.

### **Age and understanding**

One of the primary factors that affect how a child grieves is their age and where they are in their development. As children grow and develop, so will their grief. The below information is meant to be applied 'generally', with the understanding that your child's grief will be as unique as they are.

#### **Infants and toddlers**

At this age, there will be little understanding of what death and dying means but there will be a sense of someone important missing. The resulting feelings of separation distress may lead to an increase in separation anxiety, temper tantrums, irritable protests, inconsolable crying and challenges around feeding and sleeping routines.





## School-age children

Children of this age are beginning to grasp the permanence of death and start to understand that being dead is different than being alive, and dead people do not return to life nor are dead people in pain. Some children might begin to worry about both their mortality and the mortality of other grownups taking care of them. Additionally, due to children's cognitive development at this age, they may also believe that something they did or said caused the person to die. As always, it will be important to reassure children that nothing they said or did caused the person to die.

## Teenagers

Adolescence is a time of great change and, for a young person, grief often adds to the internal chaos already happening. Teenagers are often navigating a developmental conflict between exerting their independence and still needing care/support. Given that the death of a loved one is an adverse experience for any child, teenagers are particularly vulnerable during this time yet are likely to not ask for help.

Their feelings of grief may look similar to those of adults, but they may be hesitant to express their feelings – in part to act 'grown up' but also to avoid feeling different than their friends. Some young people's grief can look like depression, anxiety, inattention, apathy, or withdrawal. It will be important to support your teen in honoring their needs while still encouraging their healthy expression of emotion. Everything that a teenager is feeling makes sense and is okay – however, how they express their feelings can either be helpful, unhelpful, or at times even harmful. If you know a teenager who is engaging in substance use, self-harm, or other risk-taking behaviors – it is in their best interest to tell one of their grownups and support them in getting connected to mental health treatment.



We invite you to remember that grief is normal and all grief reactions/responses make sense. There is cause for concern when a child's grief-related thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are impacting their functioning in daily life (i.e., at home, at school, with friends). While your child is navigating an unimaginable situation – they can learn how to live with their grief.

## **The relationship they had with the person who has died**

The connection and relationship a child had with the person who died is a significant factor in understanding a child's grief. Whether that person was someone like a primary caregiver, life-long friend, childhood babysitter – or someone more distant like a teacher, bus driver, etc. will impact a child's response to loss. We invite you not to make assumptions about the nature of a relationship – your child may have felt deeply connected to someone you had no idea they had such a close relationship with. Follow your child's lead and be curious about what a relationship meant to them.

## **How the person died**

How someone dies often affects how a child grieves. Was the death sudden or anticipated? Did the child have an opportunity to say goodbye? Was the death related to mental health or involved substances? How old was the person when they died? All of these questions in addition to various others are important to consider when supporting a grieving child.

When reflecting on the answers to the above questions, we invite you to know that while all losses are different, they are uniquely and equally as painful. There is no such thing as an 'easier' or 'harder' type of loss.



# What helps grieving children and young people

While families often experience the 'same' loss (i.e., losing the same loved one), each family member's grief is unique to them. Despite there being no magic formula to support grieving children, we hope the below information will be a helpful, and tangible, place to start. You know yourself and the children in your life best, so please adapt as needed.

## How can I help and what can I do?

Grieving is often an exhausting and isolating experience for everybody – grownups and children alike. Yet, grief can be held and nourished when family members turn towards each other and honor each other's individual experience.

A few concrete invitations to support your family after loss would be to:

- Carry on with typical routines as much as possible (i.e., morning routines, returning to school, seeing friends (if desired), and re-engaging in extracurriculars (if accessible))
- Create, and schedule if needed, time to check in about grief feelings. Children often need permission to grieve and express their grief...talking openly about what has occurred and normalizing potential grief feelings and reactions are gifts to the children in your life
- Remember, and write down, potential hard days. Whether that be the person's birthday, mother's/father's day, first day back returning to school, family-oriented activities at school, graduations, etc. – there will be many firsts in grief and while so much is outside of your control, you can control checking in with children and letting them know you're thinking of them

In the early days after a death, what children of any age need is extra care and concern from the adults around them. They need to know from parents and caregivers that they are still loved, that they will continue to be looked after and that they will be involved in any decisions that affect them.



What else is needed in the following days and weeks will be dependent on how the child responds, their individual personality, and the circumstances of the death. It is completely normal to feel out of your element and unsure what to do next. It might help to remember that grief is a normal response to a death and no one knows your child better than you. Provided with love from their family, and support from friends and school, most children do not need professional help, but if you are concerned, please do seek additional professional support.

## **How honest/truthful should I be?**

Adults naturally want to protect children, and often children know much more than they are 'supposed' to know. Children pick up on atmosphere and will be aware that there is something that everyone else knows about besides them. This can create feelings of exclusion and isolation from the rest of the family. Additionally, honest information – shared in developmentally appropriate ways – can often be relieving for children to hear, as the meaning they create in their minds is often scarier to them than the truth. A very sad truth is better for a child than uncertainty and confusion. What a child does not know they tend to make up with their imagination, and their fantasies can be very distressing to them and difficult to deal with.

When there are no secrets, a family has the chance to get closer together; the children can trust in the adults around them and are more likely to express their feelings more freely, talk about any fears, and be able to receive reassurance and comfort.

## **What words do I use?**

Phrases such as 'gone to sleep' or 'passed away' or words such as 'lost' may feel kinder, yet are misleading to children and can lead to confusion and inadvertently complicate their grief process. For example, adults often encourage children to find things that they have lost, so they may continue to look for the person who has died. Similarly, using the term 'gone to sleep' may lead them to associate going to sleep with dying which can result in anxieties at bedtime.

Saying the person 'went away' may cause the child to feel abandoned or think he or she did something wrong and is no longer loved. Use simple words appropriate for the child's age and understanding. It is much more helpful for children when adults use words such as 'dead' and 'died' rather than euphemisms.

## **What does it mean that my child keeps asking me the same question over and over?**

Questions need to be answered honestly, and in simple language suitable for the child's age and understanding. Young children may need repeated explanations and answers, which is often emotionally distressing and challenging for any adult to deal with. We invite you to take care of yourself and rely on your support network when engaging in these conversations. Remember that when children ask repeated questions, it is their way of trying to make sense of what has happened. When a child brings you what is on their mind, it is an indication that they feel safe enough to share their confusion and not-knowing with you.

## **How can I help my child express their feelings?**

Children of all ages do not like to feel pressured to express powerful emotions; it can feel too painful or just not the right time. While adults are used to talking about their feelings, talking is only one form of emotional expression. We invite you to think about the following alternatives which are more interactive:

- Use art or play to support your child's sense of developmentally appropriate control and as a vehicle for discussing hard and painful feelings
- Spend time in nature (i.e., the woods, a garden, a body of water). Nature provides many natural opportunities to observe and discuss the life cycle
- Engage in shared family activities; such as playing a game, taking the dog for a walk, eating a meal together, or creating a memory box together.
- Read children's grief books together

## **How long does grief last?**

Children and young people will carry their grief with them throughout their lives. Children's grief will change as they grow and change. With support from adults around them, they will learn to navigate their life after loss while also remembering their person who died and carrying their grief with them.

Children and teenagers may revisit the details surrounding the death of an important person in their lives as they grow older. Feelings they had when younger will be different several years further on as their understanding matures and the meaning of death changes as they move through life. You will likely notice that children's grief reactions intensify during transition moments, such as graduating from highschool, college, celebrating birthdays or anniversaries, etc.

## **What do I tell school?**

Your child's teachers can be incredibly helpful assets in supporting their grief and adjustment back to school following loss. It is also important to remember that you get to decide what information you feel comfortable, if you feel comfortable sharing at all. It is often enough for your child's teachers to know that someone special in their life died...what else you choose to share or not share is completely up to you and your family. By collaborating with your child's school, you're letting your child know that there are other grownups who can help support them. Bereavement websites that are safe are suggested at the end of this sheet.

## **Is it okay for my children to see me upset?**

Your children need you to be a model, not a hero. Share your feelings with your child; children learn to grieve from the adults around them. When parents are open and expressive without making their children responsible for taking care of their adult feelings, children are likely to share their feelings with adults too.





You may be grieving too, and your experience deserves to be witnessed and supported by other adults in your life. Whether they are friends, family, or professional helpers – you also deserve care.

## **Looking after yourself is essential**

The first step to supporting a grieving child or young person is to get support for yourself. It is not a sign of weakness or not being able to cope if you seek help from others. Be compassionate and generous with yourself as you balance all the demands of daily life while also grieving – again, it may feel hard because it is hard...and you're doing great.

## **Managing your own isolation and difficult feelings**

Grief can be very isolating. Finding information about bereavement support, or joining a support group, can feel supportive to know you're not alone and realize that what you are feeling, painful as it may be, is normal.

You may notice that you are not able to function as you typically do. You may be tired, have a poor memory, find it difficult to concentrate, or feel that nothing is important. Grief is just as much a physical experience, as it is an emotional one. Sometimes – finding ways to release tension in our bodies – like going for a walk, sitting outside, or taking a shower – can help feel like a physical release.

One of the most difficult aspects of grieving is the feeling of being out of control. It may feel hard to even conceive of restructuring your day after losing a loved one, and we invite you to find tiny moments of control where you can. This can look like planning your day in advance, choosing whether you want tea or coffee in the morning, determining what time you want/need to wake up in the morning, etc.

## Returning to work or school

If you are returning to work or school, there are ways to ease yourself back in. Perhaps you could ask a work colleague to accompany you to the office on the first day. If it feels safe and comfortable, you could talk to your manager about how they can help support you. If you find that one part of the day is harder than others (i.e., mornings are filled with many grief reminders) – is there flexibility in your job to have a later start to the day or work later into the evening? Let people at work or school know whether you want to talk about what has happened or not. You can always change your mind, and you know your needs best.

There are no rules in grief. It can help to listen to yourself and learn what works for you. Accept that what helps initially may change over time. Whatever happens, be kind to yourself and give yourself grace as you continue navigating life after loss. Although it may initially seem impossible, with the right support you can adjust to a new way of living that includes your grief and the precious connection you still have with the person who has died.





# Grieving before a loss

Grief is a response to loss – emotionally, cognitively, physically, and spiritually. While there is a common understanding of grief associated with a loss that has already occurred, people – grownups and kids alike – can also experience ‘anticipatory grief’. Anticipatory grief is grief related to the recognition that a loss is impending or may occur.

For children of parents with a serious illness, ‘anticipatory grief’ often includes experiencing the losses along their parent’s illness journey — not solely around the prospect of death. It means grappling with and grieving the loss before it completely unfolds.

Anticipatory grief can take many forms, the below are a list of common (and normal) responses:

- Sadness around the upcoming loss and around losses that may have already occurred.
- Anger about the changes that are occurring or that may occur.
- Confusion about why the death is occurring and about the changes that are happening to.
- Helplessness/hopelessness that they, most likely, cannot change the fact that the person is dying.
- Anxiety about when death may actually occur or the health of other loved ones.
- Physical issues such as changes in sleeping/eating patterns, headaches, stomachaches, tightness in chest.
- Difficulty focusing, concentrating, or remembering things.



## Ways to Support Children with Anticipatory Grief

Providing the child or young person with information (at an age-appropriate level) about the condition of the dying person.

Allowing the young person to express his/her emotions while also holding limits and boundaries. "It is okay to feel angry, and it is not okay to hit your sister". Emotional expression can also include drawing, painting, coloring, music and/or sports and exercise. Oftentimes children express themselves in non-verbal ways and need other outlets than talking.

Allowing the child to be age-appropriately involved in the care of the dying person at a level that is comfortable to both the child and the parent. Some children may want to be more involved than others – and giving children age-appropriate control (while navigating a situation that is incredibly out of their control) can feel grounding and reassuring for a child. Age-appropriate control can look like choosing music to listen to with the person, helping with meals, going to see them either before or after school, etc.

Depending on your unique child, they may either want to be more involved or less involved. Giving children a choice, again, is the most important factor and honoring where they are in their own grief journey.

Re-assuring the child that while no one will ever replace their special person who is dying, the child will be cared for (and not abandoned) after the death.

Providing children and other family members with the opportunity to say goodbye in a way that is helpful to the child or young person. Some examples can include: reading a special story with their person, creating a memory box, writing them a letter, drawing them a goodbye picture, or simply sitting with them.

# Preparing children for funerals

By adulthood, most of us have likely (and unfortunately) attended a funeral. When a child loses a parent, sibling, grandparent or friend – what are funerals like for them? How do children understand rituals related to death? How do children say goodbye? What do children need when attending burials, viewings, etc.? How can services related to death honor grieving children and family's unique needs?

Each answer to the various questions above will vary according to your individual family, religious beliefs, cultural values, and parenting principles. As always, the information we share is an invitation – something to hold in mind that is in service of children's well-being.

While every family has its own traditions and beliefs, and these will play a strong role in funeral and memorial service planning and decisions, caregivers/adults may not be aware that one of the most helpful things they can do for their children during this time is to give them developmentally appropriate control by providing them with choices.

When children lose a loved one, it is often one of the most helpless and powerless experiences they will ever navigate. It is a meaningful and important experience for children to have the opportunity to say goodbye to the person who died in a way that feels right to them. Saying goodbye is never easy, and providing children with the opportunity to do so is a right they deserve to have. Children are able to cope best when they have a developmentally appropriate understanding of what is occurring.



When preparing children to attend a funeral, burial, cremation, or other type of death ceremony...we invite you to consider the below:

- Start with what children know → “what do you know about that?” or “how do you understand what that is?”
- Depending on the age of the child, it may be helpful to remind them that when someone dies they no longer feel pain, do not have a heartbeat, and cannot breathe anymore. Children are sometimes worried about the person “not being able to breathe” or “being in pain” if they are buried or cremated
  - Explaining cremation to kids: If someone is cremated after they die, that means their body is placed in a box in a very hot room and their bodies turn into ashes. This does not hurt because the person is dead and cannot feel any pain. Sometimes the ashes are placed in a container called an urn. Some families may choose to spread or release the ashes in a special place/at a special time or keep the urn somewhere special in a safe place.
  - Explaining burial to kids: If someone is buried after they die, that means their body is put in a special kind of box called a casket, which is then placed underground. This does not hurt because the person is dead and cannot feel any pain or breathe anymore. Sometimes there is a stone above the ground with the person’s name, birthday, and other details. People’s bodies are buried at a place called a cemetery and whenever you want to visit the person’s body, you always can.
- Observe your child’s body language and facial expressions as you share this information with them. “I notice your leg started shaking...” or “I see you thinking about this...”
- Invite their questions and give them permission to tell you what they are thinking about.
- Validate their feelings and explore ways of expressing their grief feelings together or on their own



When thinking about co-creating a plan with your child for how they want to be involved, we invite you think about the below:

- Sometimes it can be helpful to come up with a code word or hand signal so your child can let you know if they are starting to feel overwhelmed. Given that you are likely grieving yourself, it will be important to reflect on if you'll need another adult to support your child on this hard day for your family. Come up with a list of helpful adults together that can support you and your child.
- Identify a safe space with your child that they can go to if they start to feel overwhelmed or any big feeling. This could be the car, the bathroom, somewhere outside, etc.
- Review with your child...
  - Who... will be at the funeral or memorial service?
  - What... is going to happen?
  - Where... will the service take place?
  - When... will the funeral happen?
  - Why... are we doing this?

In addition to telling them what to expect, tell them how you might personally react at the service. Assure them that if you are crying or quiet, this is how you are showing sadness, but that even when you have big feelings, you are still there to take care of them.

What happens, or doesn't happen, at a funeral will be remembered forever by a child. Parents and other caregivers have the opportunity to influence a child's experience by including children in the one way they most deserve and request: informed choice.

"When someone dies we have a special service called a funeral. The service is often held in a special place (church, chapel, synagogue or mosque) and is a time for people to say goodbye to the person who has died and to be with their family."

“At the funeral, there might be songs and prayers and people saying what they remember about the person who has died.”

“On Tuesday we’re having dad’s funeral. His body will be there in a special box called a coffin and many of dad’s family and friends will be there. Some of them may be very upset and may be crying. After the funeral, dad’s body in the coffin will be buried under the ground or cremated which means dad’s body will be turned into ashes. Would you like to go to dad’s funeral?”

## **Considerations for children viewing the body and attending a service**

Families will have different cultural and religious beliefs about seeing the person who has died and attending the funeral, but it can help a child to:

- begin to say goodbye
- begin to accept the reality and finality of the death
- begin to understand what has happened
- be less scared
- feel part of what is happening
- share with others an important last memory about the person who died

Probably the biggest factor that will affect a younger child’s attendance at a funeral is if they feel their presence is welcome there. If there is going to be tension (as opposed to sadness) they will pick this up and feel more distressed by the atmosphere than by what is happening. Many children understand and appreciate sharing in other people’s sadness – after all that is what they are feeling too. It’s your family and you know them best.



## **If children can't attend the funeral**

If it will not be possible or appropriate for your children to attend the funeral, for whatever reason, there are other ways in which they can be involved. Perhaps they could be involved in the planning of the service, choosing a particular piece of music to be played or poem to be read. They may wish for something to be put in the coffin, for example, a picture or card. Sometimes a child might choose two identical objects, such as a soft toy, send one to be put into the coffin and keep one for themselves.

If the funeral happened a while ago and your children regret not attending, it is never too late to have a memorial or other ceremony that includes them saying goodbye. This could be visiting the grave or a special place, holding a ceremony or lighting candles. You'll find some other ideas for alternative goodbyes below.

## **Make alternative arrangements**

If the child doesn't attend the services after considering their options, there are still many ways to help them say goodbye to a loved one. Here are some ideas for rituals:

- With close adult supervision, light candles at home or in a public place to remember those who died. Battery-operated candles are an alternative.
- Work together to design a ceremony that is consistent with their own culture, religion or tradition.
- Offer to look at pictures together of the loved one, or ask if they'd like a framed photo of the person in their room.
- Say prayers together at home or in their places of worship.
- Tell stories and memories of the loved one.
- Create a memory box with your child.



This can be a critical time due to the abundance of support that families generally get before the funeral. Often after the funeral there is less support and the death of the loved one begins to take on a different meaning as day-to-day life resumes.

Follow up with your child to talk about their feelings and questions. Reassure them that their feelings are valid, and consider that they might need help naming these complicated emotions. There are many books written for children about death. Choose a few that you feel will help your child express their emotions and read these with them.

Find ways to keep talking about the loved one. The family can create a jar where family members can put in questions, memories or concerns. Then once a week, the family gathers around and pulls the papers out to start discussions about the loved one. Later this can be used to fill up with memories that any family member can go to when they need to remember their loved one.

Younger children may talk more when they are engaged in physical activities. Engage them in a play activity that they may have enjoyed with the loved one and then talk about the loved one while participating in the play activity.



If the child has a creative outlet or talent, encourage them to use this as a way to express their experiences. If they are willing, have them share this with the family. Make arrangements to spend more time with and support your child afterward – particularly at bedtime. Be prepared for repeated questions about the event, even at times that seem to come suddenly out of nowhere. Ask them if they might want to talk to someone else such as a teacher, therapist, or doctor about the experience and offer to join them.

Be mindful of moments of separation with your child. Children may worry that something bad might happen to their family. Reassure them by explaining where you are going and when you'll return so they know what to expect.

Don't forget your needs. Taking care of yourself is a critical part of supporting your child. Don't hesitate to reach out to a friend, loved one or mental health professional if needed. You deserve love and care, too.

# We're here for you.

If you or anyone else need support, we're here to help. We want you to know you're not alone, and it's also incredibly important for you to remind your niece she's not alone.

We will be producing a wide range of guides similar to this one for children and the people around them. If you know someone who could benefit from a guide, but don't see one that pertains to their situation available on our website, please reach out to us at [info@elizabeth.org](mailto:info@elizabeth.org)

Thank you for turning to us in such a difficult time. We hope you found this resource helpful, and that it provides some comfort to you and your family.

For more resources, please visit  
**[elizabeth.org](https://elizabeth.org)**



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