

Should children attend a funeral?

Some families believe that children should not attend a funeral. However, it can help them to begin to accept the reality of the death and also to be less scared. Children are usually more scared about what they don't know than what they are allowed to be part of as this enables them to feel more included.

From conversations with bereaved children and young people we have supported at Winston's Wish, we know that they value the chance to choose. We have spoken to many children who are really pleased that they were able to attend the funeral and we have spoken to many others who did not go and later deeply regretted it. In order to make a sensible choice about going or not, they need to know what is involved.

Ways to explain a funeral to children and young people

It helps to give your child enough information about the funeral so that they can decide whether they want to attend or not. Here are some examples of what you might say:

"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 Thursday 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?"

How children and young people experience grief

Children experience grief differently from adults. For adults, it feels like having to wade through rivers of grief, and they may get stuck in the middle of a wide sea of grieving. For children, their grieving can seem more like leaping in and out of puddles. First reactions may range from great distress to seeming not to be interested. One minute, they may be sobbing, the next they are asking 'What's for tea?'. It does not mean they care any the less about what has happened.

Why it can help to attend the funeral

Families will have different cultural and religious beliefs about 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 positive ways in which they can be involved.

Perhaps they could be involved in the planning of the funeral, 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 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 here](#).

Where to get support

Winston's Wish provides support to grieving children, young people and their families all over the UK, and we are here for you if you need us. Our Freephone National Helpline can offer guidance, support and information for bereaved families and the professionals caring for them – call 08088 020 021.

You can also email us on ask@winstonswish.org or use our [online chat](#). Our [Winston's Wish Crisis Messenger](#) is available 24/7 for anyone needing urgent support in a crisis. Text WW to 85258.