

# SAYING GOODBYE AFTER SOMEONE HAS DIED

In so many important ways the person who has died will continue to be a continuing part of a child's life and memories. We are using the term 'goodbye' here to include the kinds of events (seeing the body, the funeral, memorial services) that take place after someone has died.

We recognise that, depending on faith and cultural practices and beliefs, there may not be much time to prepare a child for what happens or to include them after someone dies.

It is important to keep making clear that the person's body cannot feel anything nor do anything. If, for example, the body is in a funeral home, you could explain that the person who died is not cold, they're not hungry, they're not lonely.

Once in a while, a child is confused when we talk about a person's 'body'; it's worth checking that they realise you are talking about the whole of the person's body, including the head and legs.

## Seeing the person's body

The decision whether or not to see ('view') the body of the person after they have died will be a personal one: this is just as true for children as it is for adults. Often parents and carers believe that it would be too distressing for a child – or for themselves. Or they think that the final image of the body of the person who has died will block out other images. Preparation is the key. Often a child's imagination about what someone will look like after they have died is worse than the reality. If children have clarity they often can manage this very well. Being left with the image of a person's body doesn't have to be a negative thing, and we encourage conversations both about what the person looked like after they died, as well as the conversations about what they were like when they were alive. This balance is important for children to be able to carry the positive memories alongside their grief and loss. Mental images of the person alive will, in time, be more powerful than the images of them after death.

Seeing the physical body of the person who has died can help a child begin the process of understanding that death is final and can also play a very valued part of saying goodbye.

For a child to be able to make this choice, they will need some clear information and some preparation for what seeing the person's body will actually mean.

## How to prepare children to see the body

If your child decides they do want to see the body then there are some important ways you can help to prepare them.

- make sure your child has understood that the person has died. If a child is asked "do you want to go and see Uncle Jack?" then they will, of course, say that they do, as they may not understand that it is his body they will be seeing. Having had the conversation will make seeing the body easier for your child to understand
- explain that the person's body will look and feel a little different to the living person's body. It will help to explain again that the person has died, their body has stopped working, their heart has stopped beating and their brain has stopped thinking. Although their eyes will be closed, they are not asleep. For example: *'Amy's body has stopped working and that makes her look a little different to when you saw her last week. Because her heart isn't beating any more, her blood isn't being pumped around her body, so she looks quite pale. Her skin is also quite cold to touch and a little harder than it was when she was alive. You can touch her, though, and still kiss her if you want to.'*
- sometimes, a person's face or body is hurt too badly to be comfortable to see. If this happens, the funeral director may be able to make it possible to hold the hand of the person who has died – or even the foot. For example: *'Patrick's body was hurt very badly when he died. Patrick didn't feel that pain, but it does make his face look very changed to how you remember him. I know you want to say goodbye, so I've asked the funeral directors to make it possible for us to hold one of his dear, beautiful hands instead of seeing his face. His face and the rest of his body will be covered up with a piece of material.'*
- describe what else they might see, especially how the body will be presented. This includes describing whether the body will be on a table or inside coffin and what clothes the person will be wearing. For example: *"Mum will be lying in a wooden box called a coffin. The lid will be open so we will be able to see her body and she will be dressed in the outfit that you helped to choose."*
- describe the room where the person who has died will be. If possible, you could visit beforehand so that you can describe it (*'it's a little chilly in the room but there's a big window looking out on some trees. It's painted a nice pale blue colour and it doesn't smell at all funny.'*) Or if possible, take them to the room before the body is there so they can get a sense of what it will be like.
- reassure them that it is their decision and that they can change their mind. They can stand at the door and look from a distance or they can go close and touch the person – it is their choice. Remind them that they can leave at any moment and that they can change their mind at any point
- take something to leave with the body. This could be a card, a photo, a flower. This also helps if your child decides not to go in – they can still feel that they have done something for the person
- reassure them that there is no right or wrong choice, and if they choose not to go that does not mean that they didn't love the person who has died. This is especially important when there are siblings, some who want to view the body and some who don't
- if your child does not want to see the person's body but does want to have some time with the body before a funeral, they may find it easier to spend time with the coffin lid closed.

# The funeral

## Attending the funeral

Parents may be unsure about whether to include children in a funeral; sometimes this is because of cultural or religious beliefs that need to be followed. But sometimes, parents are unsure because of their anxiety over the impact attending a funeral might have on a child.

Your children are your children; you know their individual needs, worries, strengths. At Winston's Wish, we have listened to and supported thousands of children and young people across the years. We have spoken to children who chose to attend the funeral of someone important and were glad they did. We have spoken to children who chose not to attend and had no regrets. We have never spoken to a child who attended a funeral and wished they hadn't... but we have spoken to very many children who did not have the chance to attend and deeply regret it.

Children really value the chance to choose whether or not to attend. Being at a funeral can help them to begin to accept the reality and finality of the death and begin to understand a little more about what has happened. Being part of what is happening can help children feel included in sharing this important memory with those they love. Children understand and appreciate sharing in the sadness of people close to them: after all that is what they are feeling too.

Sometimes, it is not possible for children to attend the funeral; for example, it may take place in another country. There are other positive ways in which they can be involved, for example, through helping to plan the funeral, choosing a particular piece of music to be played or a poem to be read. They may wish for something to be put in the coffin on their behalf, for example, a picture, flower or toy.

One significant factor that may 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 between family members or past partners (as opposed to natural sadness), they will pick this up and feel more distressed by the atmosphere than by what is happening.

## Ways to explain a funeral to children and young people

To help a child or young person decide whether or not to attend a funeral, it helps for them to have clear information about what will happen, who will be there, how people may react and whether the funeral will involve a burial or a cremation. Here are some examples of what you might say:

*'After someone dies, we have a special service called a funeral. A funeral is a chance for people to say goodbye to the person who has died. It's also a time for people to be with the family of the person and show them our support. The service is usually held in a special place (for example: church, chapel, synagogue, mosque, natural burial ground). Usually, there are some music, some prayers and people say 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 afterwards, his body in the coffin will be {buried / cremated}. Many people will be there – all of our family and so many of our friends and Dad's colleagues. People will be upset because it is so very sad that Dad has died but they will also be talking about their memories of him.'*

## How to explain burial and cremation

Adults sometimes wonder if children will be concerned or even frightened by discussion of what actually happens to the body during a funeral. In our experience, simple, straight-forward explanations answer children's natural questions and can be reassuring. Here are some ways of explaining what happens:

*'Remember I was talking about a funeral being a chance to say goodbye to the person who has died? Although the person has died, we treat their body very respectfully and gently, even though the person can't feel what happens to their body after they have died. Around the world, people have different traditions for what happens. Here, we either 'bury' or 'cremate' someone's body.*

*'**Bury**' means that the coffin with their body inside will be gently placed in a hole in the ground and covered in soft earth. This is called 'a grave'. People then might plant flowers to grow over the grave and sometimes come to visit to spend some time thinking about the person who died.*

*'**Cremate**' means that the coffin with their body inside will be gently placed in a hot fire which turns it into soft, powdery ashes. When these are cool, people sometimes scatter the ashes at a place that was special to the person who died, or people might keep the ashes at home in a special container called 'an urn'. People sometimes turn some of the ashes into something that helps them to remember the person who died.*

*Remember that the person's body can't feel anything anymore, so this doesn't hurt them.'*

If it fits with your own beliefs, it will help if the child has had some preparation about the difference between the body of the person and the part that made them who they were. Some people call this a soul, or a spirit, or love, or 'what was special about Daddy' or 'what we will remember about Daddy'.

## How to prepare children for a funeral

- remind children that the funeral is a chance for everyone who cared about the person who died to say goodbye and to show their support to that person's family
- offer them clear information about what will happen and in which order (for example: the service, the coffin leaving to be cremated or the burial, the reception (*the cup of tea and piece of cake afterwards*))
- explain again (as above) about the fact that the person has died; their body will not be aware of anything that is happening
- say who you expect to be there and prepare them for the way people might react. They may see adults in deep distress – but this is a reasonable response to the huge thing that has happened
- also, explain that people can't help saying something like 'How lovely to see you' when meeting a cousin; this doesn't mean they are happy and enjoying the occasion
- some children can be shocked that the funeral reception afterwards can feel more like a party. Explain that adults are sharing memories of the person who died and these include happy memories... it means they are celebrating the person who was alive, not that they died
- prepare them for some of the things that adults may say to them. For example, boys may be told after the death of their father that they are the 'man of the house now'. Remind them that they are not; other adults are responsible
- have a special person who is there to act as key supporter for the child; this could be someone like a grandparent or family friend. This person can leave with the child if it becomes overwhelming, be alert to how they are feeling and help out with tricky conversations with distant relatives. This frees the child's parent to be able to participate fully in the funeral {for your own sake?}
- sometimes, a child will choose to attend parts of the funeral – for example, the service and the reception; others might find the reception too much. Or adults can suggest this to the child
- think about ways the child can be involved in a funeral. This may be through planning the service, choosing music, choosing the clothes the person will wear. Some children may want to say a few words they have written or read a poem. Reassure them that someone else can take over if it becomes overwhelming
- children may wish to have something special placed in the coffin, for example a drawing, a photo, or something linked to a shared memory
- keepsakes from the funeral service can be very meaningful for children. For example, some flowers from the tributes to press and keep; a leaf from one of the trees in the grounds; a pebble from the surrounding area; the order of service
- let them know that they can change their minds at any time about attending the funeral or about reading, for example. Check that they are happy with the choice they've made – but not too often, since children may say what they think you want them to say to please you
- give plenty of reassurance that they can still be involved and participate in saying 'goodbye' even if they choose not to attend and that they won't be criticised if they don't go to the funeral.

## Capturing memories

A funeral offers a valuable opportunity to ask those who attend to contribute towards a store of memories and stories for the children to explore over time. Stories about the person who died play a crucial part of maintaining memories for children.

Sometimes, people provide cards on which those present at the funeral can jot down memories, thoughts, anecdotes. However, people usually write much more if they are encouraged to take the cards away and send them back to the family afterwards. Those who can't attend can have the memory card emailed or posted.

These stories and memories become increasingly precious to children; and have a particularly important part to play for children who are very young when their special person died. When few memories remain – or when there are none – stories take their place in building up a picture of the person.

## Other ways to say goodbye

If it is not possible or children choose not to attend the funeral, 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.

## Memorials and celebrations of life

Not all funerals are sombre occasions; there has been a recent trend for funerals that are more colourful and celebratory. Sometimes, people assume that these are easier for children to attend. In practice, children can feel uncomfortable and confused at this type of funeral: why aren't people feeling sad that their important person has died?

It helps if the 'saying goodbye to someone who has died' and the 'celebrating the person who lived' events can be separated by a little time. This also gives a chance for the family, including the children, to take their time to plan for a special memorial service.

A memorial service can also take the place of a funeral for children who could not or who chose not to attend. This might be linked to the date of death, or to the person's birthday. Also, if the funeral happened some time ago and children regret not attending, it is never too late to have a memorial or other ceremony that includes and involves them.