

WHAT ABOUT THE FUNERAL?

ELEMENTARY AGE KIDS AND MEMORIAL EVENTS

One of the first questions families or caregivers might ask when someone dies is whether a child should attend the funeral, visitation, wake, or other memorial event. This can be a complicated decision depending on the age of the child, expectations of what the memorial event will involve (both scheduled events and reactions from people who are expected to attend), what the child knows about the death, and their personality and predicted needs. Families must consider both the need for closure and the developmental needs of their child or children.

CONVERSATIONS TO CONSIDER

Children may have strong feelings about their desire to attend or not attend a memorial event, or may be confused or curious about what will happen. The following are good questions to consider or discuss with a child while deciding how they should participate in events honoring the person who died.

- **What will happen to the person's body?**

If your person's body will be present and visible at the memorial event, talk to the child about what this may be like. For example, "Our person's body will be present at the funeral, in a large, decorated box called a coffin. Since they are not alive anymore, they will not be able to move or talk, and they might look different than you are used to because they are so still. You might notice that their skin looks a little different, or their hands are across their chest. Some people choose to look at or speak to their person's body, and others don't. Would you like to see our person's body, or not see them?" If their body will not be visible, you could say something like, "Our person's body will be at the funeral, in a large wooden box which will be closed. There will be a picture of our person placed on top, and people may place flowers or other important items on top. Would you like to look at the coffin, or stay further away?"

- **What will happen at the memorial event?**

Talk to your child about what this event might be like, such as when they will come in, where they will sit, and who will speak. For example, "This will be a lot like a church service. We will sing, pray, and read the Bible.

People will also talk about our person." If the caregiver expects to be active in the event, talk to the child about this as well, saying something like "I will be in the front of the church for a while before the service, and another grown up will stay with you in the chairs. Who would you like to sit with you?" If there are expectations of the child, such as being a part of a receiving line, talk about these and give as many choices as possible about how they want to be involved.

- **What will happen after the memorial?**

Many times, other events happen following a funeral or memorial, such as a graveside service, entombment service, funeral lunch or supper, or other smaller gathering involving family or close friends. Let your child know what will likely take place during this time. For example, if your person will be buried, you could say, "After the funeral we will go to a place where people's bodies are put in the ground, called a cemetery. We will drive into the cemetery and follow the directions to the place where our person's body will be buried. We will have another, shorter service where the pastor will talk to our family and read scripture, then our person's body will be placed in their grave."



CONVERSATIONS TO CONSIDER

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- **Who will attend the memorial, and how will they act?**

Children may be unfamiliar with some of the people attending the memorial. As much as possible, help them understand who is likely to come. Give some examples of behavior they might see, such as others wanting to hug them, crying, laughing, or telling stories. Help them consider how they want to respond, offering as much choice as possible.

If your child wants to attend the memorial event, consider these questions with them:

- **Do they want to attend the entire event?**

Depending on your traditions, some memorial events can last a long time. Consider the child's attention span and behavioral expectations, as well as physical and emotional stamina and desire. A typical attention span for a child in elementary school is around 10-30 minutes, so it is likely that a child will need breaks, or other ways to occupy themselves during a memorial. Remember, it is okay for a child to attend part of an event, to come in late, or leave early. They may want to have time with family or friends without attending the entire event. If you or the child are concerned about how long they could manage a memorial event, consider planning what parts they will attend, how they can let you know if they need to leave or need a break, and where they could go if needed.

- **Will they be involved in the memorial?**

Sometimes children want to participate in the funeral or other memorial event. They might want to read scripture or a letter they have written, participate in

music, light a candle, or be up front with someone else while they talk about the person who died. Talk about whether they want to participate, letting them know that it's okay if they want to do or say something in front of others, and it's also okay if they don't.

- **Who can support them?**

Children may need different support than adults do during a memorial event. Consider designating or talking with your child about choosing someone to be with them if they need or want additional support. This could mean finding a family member to play or spend time with them in another room if they become restless during a funeral, or asking a friend's family to stay with them during part of a visitation or calling hours. Children may be hesitant to ask for support from primary adults, who are also close to the person who died, and adults may want to or feel responsible to attend all parts of a memorial event. For this reason, it can be helpful to identify outside supports who have more flexibility.

If the child does not want to attend the memorial event, or there are other reasons they should not, consider the following:

- **What will they do during the memorial?**

Who will stay with them, and what will that person tell them about what is happening? Even children who may be too young to sit still or participate in memorial events recognize stress in people around them and are likely to be affected. If they are old enough to choose not to attend, or if caregivers have decided this is not in their best interest, who can be a positive support during this time? It is important to identify people who know what is going on and can support the

child's decision not to attend, answer questions, and provide care and distraction.

- **What other opportunities for closure will they need?**

Whether or not a child attends a memorial event, they will need to engage in some way as they process the death of their person. Talk with the child about what they would like to do to say goodbye or honor the person who died.