

WHAT ABOUT THE FUNERAL?

PRESCHOOLERS 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 at the funeral, in a big decorated box called a coffin. Since they are not alive anymore, they will not be able to move or talk. Sometimes, people want to see their person's body, and others don't. Would you like to see our person's body, or not see them?" With very young children, it is also important to consider how much they seem to understand about the person's inability to respond to them. If their body will not be visible, you could say something like, "Our person's body will be at the funeral, in a closed wooden box. There will be a picture of our person placed on top. Would you like to see the coffin, or stay further away?"
- **What will happen at the memorial event?** Talk to your child about what this event might be like. 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?"
- **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 stand by the place where our person's body will go. The pastor will speak a little more, and then we will leave."
- **Who will attend the memorial, and how will they act?** Children may be unfamiliar with some of the people attending. 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.



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

- **Should they 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. Young children will likely need different plans than older children or teens. Remember, it is okay for a child to attend part of an event, to come in late, or leave early. Consider planning what parts they will attend, who else could be with them, and who will care for them before they arrive or after they leave.
- **Who can help care for them?** Children need different support than adults do during a memorial event. Consider designating and talking with your child about choosing someone to care for them specifically. This could mean finding a family member to play with the toddler in another room if they become restless during a funeral or sit with a preschooler while the rest of the family is in a receiving line. Young children might be clingier immediately after a death and need trusted people who are able to care for them based on their developmental needs.

If the child does not want to attend the memorial event, or there are other reasons they should not, such as understanding and attention span, 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. Consider how to explain what is happening if they do not know.
- **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.