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How and When Should Children Attend Funerals?

Funerals are a time we gather to honor a person's life and to mark his or her passing. Attending a funeral helps people experience their loss with community support, and begin the transition to living without a loved one. Even though it may be difficult and painful, this participation helps grieving people, whether adults or children.

Each child is unique, with individual worries and abilities to handle social interactions. Therefore, while encouraging a child to attend a funeral, give a genuine choice about attending. It may be appropriate to allow for some options, such as attending a private family time at the funeral home before the service begins.

Here are some things to keep in mind when talking to children about funerals:

- Give children specific information about what they will see at the funeral. Tell them where the funeral will take place, what the room will look like, who will be coming, how long the service is likely to take, etc.
- Let children know that people attending the funeral will show many different emotions and may express them intensely. People may be upset, and it is good for people to express these feelings. Also, let the child know that people may smile, laugh and enjoy remembering good and funny things about the loved one who died.
- Let children know that funerals are important. They are a place for people to come together in their sadness over a loss. They also honor the life of the person who died and affirm that life goes on.
- Funeral homes will usually accommodate allowing children to visit before the funeral with only a few close caring adults. This may allow the children to feel more comfortable and give them a chance to talk more freely and ask questions.
- Try to provide for the child to have a close person to be available just to them at all times during the funeral process. This person needs to be a caring presence, able to focus on the child.
- Recognize that children often experience short bursts of emotion. They are impacted by loss, but outward signs of their grief will come and go. Allow for the full range of emotions in children, including happiness, playfulness, sadness, and anger.
- Give the children a choice about whether to view the body. Children often have no innate fear about the body, and seeing the body provides a chance to say goodbye and makes the loss more real.
- Listen to what children say and watch what they do. It is important to let children express what losing their loved one is like for them.
- Provide the child with life affirming messages. Even though loss is painful, life continues.