

Explaining Funerals, Burials and Cremations to Children

Adults are often concerned about how to best support the needs of the children in their world following the death of someone close. It is natural to want to protect them from hurt or upset. However, sheltering children from the truth, may lead to further pain and confusion.

Our experience has shown us that talking openly and honestly with children about death and the funeral process creates a strong foundation of trust which enables children to ask questions and to explore their fears or concerns.

Resilience

Children are remarkably resilient and if well supported, will often bring a natural curiosity and acceptance to end of life topics. When speaking to children about death and funeral care, it is important to choose language that is age appropriate and to communicate with them in an honest and consistent way.

Children may start by asking direct questions or talking repeatedly about the person who has died. This is ok. Be guided by their questions, answer them honestly and simply. Children tend to build on layers of grief and have more questions as they grow older and understand death in different ways. We invite you to grow with them.

Your Grief

Don't be afraid of children seeing your tears or sadness. Grief is a normal, healthy response to the death of someone we have loved. Being honest about your feelings, gives children permission to be honest with you about theirs. Children often have a way of getting direct to the heart of grief with their questions, it can be painful and at a time when you least expect it.

If you feel overwhelmed or uncomfortable about speaking to children about these topics, it's ok to ask another trusted person (family member, friend, social worker or counsellor) to help you with these conversations to ensure they happen.

Commonly Asked Questions

Where does a funeral director take someone after they die?

When the family are ready, a funeral director will come and collect the person after they have died and will take them to a place called a Mortuary (Mort-choo-air-y).

At the mortuary, the body of the dead person will be placed in a very cold room which stops them from becoming smelly and keeps them safe while their family organise their funeral.

Who looks after the dead person?

The person who looks after the dead person at the mortuary is called the Mortician (More-tish-un). The Mortician has the very important job of washing and caring for the person's body and dressing them in the clothes the family has chosen. Sometimes, a family will choose to help wash and dress a person after they have died.

What does a dead person look and feel like?

When a person dies, their body stops working and they become very still. They feel cold to touch because their heart has stopped beating and blood is no longer moving around their body to keep them warm. Sometimes the person's skin will change colour and look darker than usual. If you hold their hand, it will feel floppy. The eyes and mouth of a dead person might open after they die. This is a sign that their body is very relaxed and peaceful.

What is a funeral?

A funeral is a very special gathering that is held in honour of a person who has died.

It is a time where all the people who knew the person when they were alive are invited to come together to share stories, look at photos, listen to their favourite songs and remember the time they had together.

Funerals can also be a time when a person's family and friends can come and say goodbye to them in their coffin or shroud. Sometimes a coffin or shroud will be open so everyone can see the person who has died.

Families can organise a funeral themselves or they might ask a Funeral Director to help them. A funeral can be held at home, at a cemetery, in a church, outside in nature or in another special place.

There might be a Celebrant, Priest or Minister who will say some special words for the person and their family.

There are LOTS of different ways funerals can be done! What happens is up to the imagination of the person's family.

Funerals can be sad, but sometimes they can feel like a party too, where everyone laughs at the funny stories people tell.

After a funeral, there is often yummy food and cake!

Why do dead people have to be buried or cremated?

Everything that dies must return to the Earth in some way. This includes plants, animals, and people.

When a person dies, their body stops working and will become very smelly if we do not bury or cremate it. When we love someone who has died, it is our responsibility (important job) to make sure they are cared for and returned to the Earth.

Do you have to be put into a coffin when you die?

A coffin is a box that we use to place a dead person's body in to keep them safe. Some families decorate the coffin to make it be special just for their person.

But a dead person does not have to be put in a coffin. Some people choose to be buried or cremated in a shroud. A shroud is a big piece of cloth, that is used to wrap the body of a dead person to keep them safe. Sometimes a family will choose to use the person's doona cover or a special sheet, blanket, or a piece of fabric as their shroud.

If a person is being buried in a shroud, they need to be wrapped into a cloth cocoon called a 'burial shroud' which has ropes and strong handles that are used to lower the person into their grave.

Families can choose to put special things like letters, drawings and photos inside the coffin or shroud to stay with the person.

People often like to put flowers on top or inside of a coffin or shroud too.

What happens when someone is buried?

A person can be buried in a shroud or a coffin. A family can choose to lower their person into their grave with their hands using special ropes which fit under the shroud or coffin. Otherwise a special motorised machine called a 'lowering device' is used to lower the person into the ground.

A family can choose to fill the person's grave themselves with spades or a person in a big digging machine will do the job for them.

What happens when someone is cremated?

When someone's body is going to be cremated, it is taken to a place called a Crematorium.

At the crematorium, the person's body (in a coffin or shroud) is placed inside a very hot room called a cremation chamber. This chamber gets much hotter than a campfire and the person will change into a form of grey dust known as ashes. The people who work at the crematorium very carefully put these ashes into a secure plastic box to keep them safe.

The funeral director can collect the ashes from the crematorium and return them to the family of the person who has died, or a family can collect the ashes from the cemetery themselves.

Some families choose to sprinkle or bury the ashes of their person in a place in nature or a cemetery. Others may prefer to keep them at home in a special container called an urn or even in a piece of jewellery.