

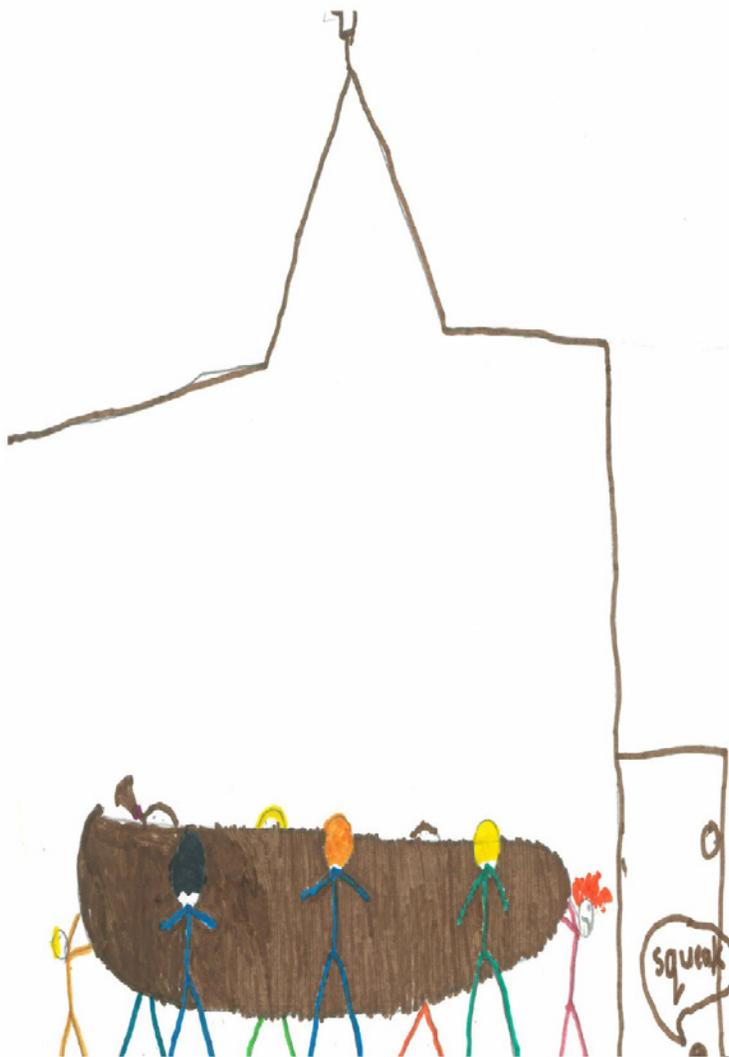


## Attending Funerals, Memorials, and Other Rituals

Children of *all* ages can be prepared to attend funerals, memorials, and other ceremonies or rituals.

There are many ways that children and youth benefit from attending these events. When children are not given the opportunity to attend they may feel excluded or rejected. It is important for children and teenagers to feel recognized as family members whose presence or participation is valued at a ceremony, ritual, or celebration of life.

Because children and youth grieve in "chunks," they may quickly switch from feeling sad or angry to feeling happy. Through play children make sense of and express their changing feelings, and they may shift between different activities frequently. Although it may seem unusual to see children playing at a ceremony, this is a natural and healthy way for children to grieve and is an outlet when they don't have the words to speak about what is happening for them. It can be helpful to pack a bag of activities or small toys (for example, paper and crayons, a stuffed animal) for a child to play with at the event.



Preparing children for what will happen at the event and talking to them about ways they can choose to be involved and what they can do if they feel overwhelmed are all important ways that you can support them in their experience and their grief.



**Before the funeral or ceremony, describe what they are likely to see and hear.** Knowing what to expect helps kids feel more comfortable and less anxious.

- ***Tell them that they may see adults crying and reassure them that it's okay.*** By seeing adults grieve, children learn healthy emotional expression. Let children know that it is okay for adults to be sad and that they do not have to cheer them up or make them feel better. At the same time, let children know that it is alright for them to cry or not to cry, and to experience all kinds of different feelings.
- ***If there will be an open casket, explain that the person will look different.*** The skin will feel tight and cold. The person's face will look different because of makeup and because they are not smiling, talking, frowning, etc. Many children are curious to see how the person looks after they have died and some children want to touch their loved one's hand, face, or body. Let them know that it is safe to touch the person's body. Some children fear that death is contagious and may need your reassurance that it is not. As much as possible, help children find opportunities to do what they want and need to do, but do not force them if they are uncomfortable. Let children and teenagers know what they can expect and give them the chance to decide when and if they'd like to see the person's body.
- ***Prepare them for people's comments, like "I'm sorry" and "be strong."*** Usually people say "I'm sorry" to apologize for something they've done, so it can be confusing for kids to hear people say they're sorry about a person's death. They may wonder what the person did that he or she is apologizing for and whether it led to

the death. Let kids know that when people say "I'm sorry" about a death they mean it as a way of sharing their feelings and showing support. It is also important to help kids figure out how to respond. Let them know that they can say "thank you" or "me too" or that they do not have to say anything at all.

Sometimes people also tell children and teenagers to "be strong" or "be good" or to take care of their parents or their family. Although these comments are well intended, it is very important that young people know that they do not have to "be strong," that it is healthy and good to express their emotions rather than trying to keep them inside. It is especially important that children and teenagers know that although it is helpful for family members to care and look out for one another, it is not their job to take care of their parents or caregivers. In fact, young people need to be reassured that although the adults around them are grieving, the adults are still able to care for them.

- ***Explain any rules or expectations for the ceremony.*** If there are places that they cannot go, things they cannot touch, or any other rules, you can let children know these things ahead of time. Most importantly, if a child behaves in a way that is not acceptable, they need to know that even though their actions were not okay, the emotions behind them are okay and natural. Some kids may need your help to identify healthy ways to express those feelings, such as through art, music, talking, physical activity, or play.

**Young children need help to understand abstract ideas about death, funerals, cremation, and burials, and can benefit from seeing these events for themselves.**

In the case of a burial, it can be reassuring to see their loved one carefully lowered into the ground and see where their gravestone will be. Very young children can understand that a gravestone is a kind of nametag or sign, and that it will help them find the right spot when they want to visit their loved one's grave. It is important to emphasize and repeat the fact that after a person dies their body does not breathe, hear, see, smell, or think anymore and will not be cold, bored, or hungry in the casket.

If the person is being cremated, explain to the child that cremation means that a special machine uses very high heat to turn the person's body into ashes. Remind them that the person will not feel any pain because their body has stopped working. Explain that an urn is a special container that holds these ashes and let them know where it will be kept or where the ashes will be scattered.



**Children and teenagers can benefit from having their friends at the ceremony to show their support.** They may need your help to figure out what to tell their friends about what has happened and how to invite them to the ceremony. They may also need your reassurance that it is okay to ask their friends to be there. You can help them practice what to say, or you might offer to talk to their friends or their friends' parents on their behalf.

**Many children and teenagers benefit from the chance to participate in the ceremony or celebration.** Putting something special, like a piece of artwork, a photograph, memento, or even a beloved toy, in the person's casket; writing something to read, or for someone else to read on their behalf at the service; choosing a piece of music to sing or to be played; or carrying flowers to the cemetery are some ways that children and teenagers can be involved. These are valuable opportunities to express their feelings and to feel included as a member of the grieving family or community. You can find out how or if the child or teen would like to participate to ensure that the experience will be meaningful for them no matter what their role.

**Talk to the children about what to do if they feel overwhelmed at the funeral.** If their caregivers are grieving as well it helps to identify another trusted adult who can be available if the children need to leave. Children can use a signal like 'thumbs up' or pointing to a door to indicate the need to leave. Reassure them that they do not have to do anything they're uncomfortable with. Whether they observe, participate, or need to leave during the service, it is all okay and it is most important for them to tell you or another trusted adult what they need.

**Check in with them at the end of the day to find out what they're thinking and feeling.** After a day filled with so many intense emotions and so many people around, it can take some time for children and teenagers to sort out their thoughts and emotions. It can be very helpful for them to have a supportive adult to help them talk through these things. You can start by asking, "What did you think of the ceremony today?" and "Is there anything that happened that you weren't sure about or that you had questions about?" If the child is open to talking with you about his

or her experience, you may also ask things like, "Was there anything that was hard for you to see or hear?", "Was there anything that felt helpful for you today?" or "Was there anything that surprised you?" Children and teenagers may need more time to think about these things before they're able to find the words to talk about it. If that's the case, let them know you're available to talk about it another time and make sure to check in with them again the next day or a couple of days later.

The Max and Beatrice Wolfe Children's Centre at the Temmy Latner Centre for Palliative Care offers education, counselling support, and medical care in the community and at our Centre to children and families where a child is dying or where children are grieving the dying or death of a loved one. We also provide consultation and education for healthcare professionals, children's mental health providers, and boards of education.

You can find more information on how to support children and youth through grief in *Living Dying: A Guide for Adults Supporting Grieving Children*, a 61-page book produced as part of the Dr. Jay Children's Grief Program of the Max and Beatrice Wolfe Children's Centre. The book is for adults who know young people who will experience - or have experienced - the dying and death of a loved one, regardless of age, relationship, or the nature of the death. To order your copy of *Living Dying: A Guide for Adults Supporting Grieving Children*, e-mail or call us.



## **MOUNT SINAI HOSPITAL**

**Joseph and Wolf Lebovic Health Complex**

**Temmy Latner Centre for Palliative Care  
Max and Beatrice Wolfe Children's Centre**

60 Murray Street, Fourth Floor, Box 13  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5T 3L9  
t 416-586-4800 ext. 6664  
f 416-586-4804  
info@tlcpc.org  
www.tlcpc.org