



Children's Grief Center

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Telling your child that someone has died: Because parents love their kids, it is natural to want to protect them from the pain of loss. However, we all do better when we are trusted with the truth and can begin to understand what is happening. What children dream up or imagine can be far worse than the reality. Simplicity and honesty are best. Give concrete, clear explanations. Refrain from "passed away" or "gone to heaven." It is important that children understand that death is permanent, that a person who has died no longer can feel, or think, and that they won't be able to come back. *"Daddy's cancer got so serious that his body was not able to heal. His heart has stopped beating, he has stopped breathing. He has died."* Answer only direct questions. Do not give more information than is asked for. Children will come back with more questions after they have processed what you have already said. It is important that children are reminded – this death was no one's fault. After they understand the permanence of death, then you can introduce your family's beliefs about the afterlife.



Is it okay to take children to funerals? Parents often worry that a funeral can be too traumatic for children. Funerals are an opportunity to connect with family and friends and offer support and sometimes it is the only time all are openly crying and showing their sadness. A child should be allowed to have the chance for support that a funeral can offer. First, explain to children about the funeral, what will happen and what to expect. Then ask children if they want to go. If no, ask if they know why they do not want to go. If children understand exactly what will happen, they usually want to go. Funerals help us accept the reality of the loss, the first task of grieving. If possible, let kids be part of decision-making. Can they select a small thing of Grandma's to go in the casket or select pictures for a memory table?



Viewings: There is a more relaxed feeling during a viewing. Friends and family visit and cry together. Children left to freely move about will make their way to the casket a few times to look at the body. Seeing a dead body can be very helpful to children. Children are curious and may want to touch the body too. Prepare them beforehand that the body will feel cold and not look exactly the same. This is another opportunity to explain the difference between “alive” and “dead.”

Burials: If you take children to the cemetery, explain that the body is going to be buried there. Explain to your child what will happen to the casket and remind them that the loved one cannot feel anything anymore.

Cremation: Adults worry that children will be horrified to learn that their loved one was cremated. If you convey your comfort with it, the children will likely feel the same way. *“Cremation is one of the ways we manage our loved one’s body after they die. Their body is dead. It doesn’t hurt them in any way.”* You can explain that cremation makes the body break down faster than if it were buried.



Going back to school: Friends and teachers may already know what happened and might not know what to say. Children may be ignored or have too much attention drawn to them. Children do not like being different and this may cause anxiety. Talk with your child before going back to school. You can even practice answers to questions you think kids and teachers might have.

Children who have had a parent die may have a difficult time going back to school, because they don’t want to separate from the surviving parent. Reassure them.

Living life without the person who died: Healing from a significant loss spans over a lifetime. The first year after the death seems hardest on families, and attending peer grief support groups can help with the healing process. In grief support groups, participants are given the opportunity to express their feelings, acknowledge their loss, embrace their memories, and learn coping strategies.



*Please check the Children’s Grief Center of NM’s website about their grief support programs for children.