

# SUPPORTING CHILDREN & TEENS THROUGH FUNERALS & MEMORIAL SERVICES



As adults, most of us have been to a funeral or memorial service before, but for your child or teen, this might be their very first time. It's natural to have a lot of questions about whether they should go and how they can be involved. We hope this Tip Sheet helps answer some of those questions and gives you a few ideas for how to support them as they find their own way to honor the person who died.

## PROVIDE CHOICES

When it comes to helping kids and teens who are grieving, one of the most important things we can do is give them choices. This is especially true for things like funerals, memorial services, or celebrations of life. Just like adults, kids and teens have their own thoughts on how to honor the person who died. They want to feel included and know that their opinions matter. This could

### THERE ARE MANY TYPES OF EVENTS TO HONOR SOMEONE'S LIFE

Depending on your family's beliefs, traditions, and practices, you might have a:

- Funeral
- Celebration of Life
- Memorial Service
- Homegoing
- Wake/Viewing
- Or other type of event

Regardless of the type of event your family has, it's important to explain what the term means to your child or teen.

be as small as letting them pick out a song or as big as asking if they want to attend the service at all. Having the chance to say goodbye in a way that feels right to them can be a really meaningful experience.



## SHOULD MY CHILD ATTEND?

People often wonder how old a child should be to attend a service, but age isn't actually the most important thing. What matters more is inviting them to go without making them feel like they have to. When kids aren't given a choice, they can feel resentful. If they're forced to go, they might feel angry. Even if they later wish they'd made a different choice, they won't have that extra layer of frustration that comes from having the decision made for them.

To make a choice, children and teens first need to know what to expect. Try to be as clear and honest as possible when explaining what will happen at the service. If you don't have all the answers, that's okay. It's perfectly fine to say, "I'm not sure, but let's try to find out together."

To help them feel more prepared, you might talk through things like:

- **Where it will happen and when**
- **Who will be there**
- **How people might act**

Let children and teens know that people express grief in lots of ways. They might see crying and

I was glad my mom told me people I didn't know would say things like 'I'm so sorry for your loss' and 'You don't remember me, but I met you when you were a baby.' She gave me ideas for what to say back and told me I could politely say 'How about a high-five?' if I didn't feel like being hugged.

hugging, but they might also see people laughing at a funny memory, sitting in total silence, yelling in anger, or even leaving the room if they get overwhelmed. Letting them know this ahead of time helps the 'big feelings' of others feel less scary.

- **What will happen**

It's great to explain the different parts of the service including who will speak, if there will be songs, prayers, or readings, any photos or videos that will be present, how long it will be, etc.

- **Where you will sit and options for where they can be in the space**

- **How they can help out if they want to**

- **Where they can go to take a break and who can go with them**

Assigning a "buddy" ahead of time is useful. It's best if it's someone who doesn't mind leaving the service if needed.

- **What will happen after the service**

Will there be a meal or gathering afterward?  
Is there someplace they would like to go – home, a friend or relative's house, the park to play?

### HOW CAN CHILDREN AND TEENS BE INVOLVED?

Many children and teens will have ideas and opinions on planning the event, and some will want to play a role. They might have suggestions for flowers, decorations, activities, music, readings, photos/videos, a drawing or piece of art they want to create, or something they've written that they'd like to read.

### HOW TO EXPLAIN TERMS YOUR CHILD OR TEEN MIGHT NOT KNOW:

**Casket:** A sturdy box made to hold a person's body after they have died. It's a way to keep the body safe when it's moved to the cemetery or the service. It's important to remember that because the body doesn't work anymore, the person doesn't feel anything inside of it.

**Cremation:** This is a way of using very high heat to turn a body into ashes – sometimes called cremains or remains. Since the person's body has stopped working, it doesn't feel any pain or heat during this process. The ashes that are left behind are white or gray and usually soft, like sand. Sometimes people spread the ashes in a special place to remember their person. Others put them in a container, sometimes called an urn. The urn might be kept at home or buried someplace special.

**Burial:** This is when the casket (or an urn) is placed into the ground, usually in a cemetery or graveyard. There might be a ceremony to say goodbye, and then the spot is covered with earth and often marked with a stone with the person's name on it. This gives us a specific place we can visit whenever we want to feel close to their memory.

Always start by explaining that the person's body stopped working, so it doesn't feel or think or breathe anymore. This can lessen children's worries that the person is scared or hurting in some way.



Remind your child that they can change their mind about attending or helping out, even once you've arrived. To keep things stress-free, decide together on a backup plan so you're both prepared if they decide they aren't up for it after all.

### WHAT ABOUT AFTER THE EVENT?

In the days and weeks after the service, try to find a moment to check in. You might ask how they're feeling about everything now that it's over. Do they have any

new questions? Are there parts they liked, or maybe parts they didn't? Things they would change if they could? If they chose not to go, you can ask if there's anything else they'd like to do now – maybe lighting a candle or drawing a picture – to say goodbye in their own way.

Thank you for taking the time to learn ways to support children and teens through events like funerals and memorial services. Grief is unique to each person and every family, so please adapt these tips as needed. To find more resources on supporting children and teens, please visit [www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org). You can also email [help@dougy.org](mailto:help@dougy.org) or call us at 503.775.5683.



The National Grief Center  
for Children & Families

#### Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources

Dougy Center's practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what they have learned from more than 65,000 Dougy Center participants. To order online, visit [dougy.org](http://dougy.org) or [dougybookstore.org](http://dougybookstore.org), or call 503.775.5683.

#### About Dougy Center

Founded in 1982, Dougy Center provides grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. Dougy Center provides support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children in grief.

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