



End-of-life Information: Pre-School Series

Talking about funerals and memorials...

Isn't it better to avoid these topics with a child so you don't frighten her?

Although she won't completely understand, giving her simple, truthful information on this life event ensures that she doesn't use her imagination to make sense of it.

How do I explain what a funeral or memorial is?

Pre-schoolers respond more to unspoken or body language than to words, responding to the worry or sadness in your actions. If what you need to say is hard to say directly, say it through play with a doll or other toy. Starting may be hard, but she will quickly respond and may take the lead. Little Teddy Bear may say to Big Teddy, "I have to go to a funeral but I don't know what that is." Or use symbols, a favourite movie or book character, toy animal, star in the sky or flower to talk about what will happen. Or try, "Remember when the flowers died last fall and we talked about how nice they used to smell?"

Explain the event's purpose: to honour the life of the person who died and a way for friends and family to be together. Describe the room; who will be there; what they will do, etc. Use simple language; answer only what is asked; don't over-answer.

Say that she may see people crying or laughing and that you might cry but that you will stop crying and that it's okay to feel sad for awhile. Say that people usually talk quietly or whisper at funerals or memorials. Describe the music and other things that will happen.

How can she be involved in the funeral or cremation?

Depending on her age, you may include her in planning the event. Encouraging her involvement helps her experience an important life event. Ask her to draw a picture to place in the coffin or to choose a symbol of something that reminds her of the person.

Should I force her to attend the funeral or memorial?

Be sure that she understands all the information and is reassured that, even though it may be hard, there will be someone to help her through it. Then, if she decides not to attend, don't force her to. Suggest that she create her own way to honour the person.

If she does choose to attend, have a trusted adult standing by who can leave with her if she needs to leave so that you will be able to stay and participate.

What about after the funeral or memorial?

Remember that she had a relationship with the person who died so she will experience grief just like the rest of the family. Families who openly talk about the person and share stories and memories will help the children see healthy ways to work through the grief. Share what's in your heart – sadness, fears, anger – and find out about her feelings too.

Be honest and real with the child. Children are naturally wise about important things. To avoid topics such as sadness and death may be confusing and frightening for her but together you can get through these very hard times.

