

# Honouring the spirit and caring for your child after death

If you have used these handouts as your guide, it means that for most of you, the dying has taken weeks or months or at least days. But no one is ever prepared for the death itself. Death and birth are peaks of human experience. Nothing else in life comes close enough for us to prepare for them. For preparing ourselves means relating them to something similar. Unless you have been this close to someone before, and been with him at the dying, you cannot really be ready for your response.

In the days right after the death you will have a lot of decisions to make and things to do. The following pamphlets may help you with the plans for what you wish done with your child's body. They are available from the Family Resource Library at BC Children's Hospital or from a health care professional.

- ♦ Autopsy
- ♦ After the Death: Burial, Cremation, Funeral, Memorial
- ♦ Organ donation

What we would like to offer in the rest of this handout are some thoughts on ways of honouring the spirit of your child and helping to make and shape memories.

Death and birth are peaks of  
human experience

"Eternal presence, glancing  
light, does not depend on  
touch or sight".  
(Errol Durbach)

# In the days after the death

## Plan any ceremonies you want

You may want one, more than one, or none. These decisions are often guided by traditions, but what you choose should reflect what you hope the ceremony will do for you and the family.

Some answers may be:

- ♦ a chance to draw everyone together whose life was touched by our child, to say farewell and draw comfort from each other
- ♦ to make an occasion to hold as a memory that we can look back on
- ♦ to share the joy that our child brought to our life and the lives of others
- ♦ to fulfill a religious ritual

It is useful to consider the costs involved and keep this in mind when you make decisions. Some costs are indicated in the pamphlet “After the Death: Burial, Cremation, Funeral, Memorial”.

### \* Organize the event

What will it be ( a memorial, a funeral, a celebration of life)?

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What shape will it take (a joy-filled celebration, a sacred happening, a religious ritual)?

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When will it be?

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Where will it be?

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Ceremonies are for the living. Talk with those closest to you around the question, “What is this ceremony for?”

Some people have decided to have just a small family event after the death and then on the anniversary of the death or on the birthday, to have a larger public event to celebrate the life.

If you are choosing a ceremony at a church, synagogue or temple, the religious leader or funeral director will help you with the planning.

Make sure you have left enough time for people who might like to come from further away.

Check that the place is available.

Who will conduct the ceremony?

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What will be included in the ceremony?

**Some ideas:**

- ◆ Prayers – the hospital chaplain or your own spiritual leader will help you with a selection.
- ◆ Music - consider what your child might have liked, or music that creates a mood you want or songs with words that are meaningful to you.
- ◆ Readings - ask a hospital chaplain or a librarian to help you find a book of suitable readings if you like the idea but nothing comes to your mind.
- ◆ Memories from people at the ceremony – this can be an invitation to speak at the moment or you can ask people to give written cards to be read.
- ◆ A silent time.
- ◆ Slides or a video set to music.

What things do you want to have in the room?

- ◆ Photos
- ◆ Flowers
- ◆ Awards
- ◆ Letters
- ◆ Candles
- ◆ Special toys, badges or other objects with special meaning.

Who will help with what?

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**Parent voice:**

*We made a memory board using photos and items that reminded us of Mark. We had his friends cut and paste the items into a collage.*

Who will be invited and how will that happen?  
(Use a separate sheet to make a list of those you want to ask.)

Parent voice:

*I kept a notebook with the names of those people who contacted us about Mandeep in his last months. I asked my brother to call all of them to tell them about the death.*

## \* Consider how to involve children in a ceremony

Try to involve the children in some ritual that they will understand. Some ideas:

- ◆ letting go of balloons on which your child's name is written
- ◆ planting a flower box with each child adding a small plant that will bloom each year
- ◆ having each child light a candle to stand in a container
- ◆ asking each child to bring a bead in a colour that makes him think of your child. Making a necklace with the beads that will hang around a photograph. (This can then also become part of a memory box.)
- ◆ asking each child to bring something to include in a memory box
- ◆ asking a school choir to sing a song at the ceremony
- ◆ suggesting that a few children write a letter to your child that can be read at the ceremony.

## \* You may want to have a eulogy as part of the ceremony

Many people find public speaking hard to do even at the best of times. But you or someone in your family may really want to do the eulogy. It may be the hardest speech you will ever give. It will not be one you regret. It can help you draw the many things you loved about your child into a memory pattern that you and others can hold onto.

Parent voice:

*I wanted to create the eulogy but I did not feel sure that I could speak it at the ceremony. I asked my sister to read my eulogy. I got this idea from another funeral I attended. The father began the eulogy for his son but when his emotions overcame him, his brother stepped forward and read the rest of it. The brother was clearly prepared ahead of time to read if he needed to.*

You can ask one of your friends or family to do a phone tree.

Including siblings and the child's friends in a ceremony can help them with their sadness.

A eulogy is a sharing, with words, of the blessing of the child's life.

A eulogy need not be a masterpiece. Honest memories are all that is needed.

## Some ideas on how to create a eulogy

- ◆ Gather your thoughts about the essence of this child and note each in point form.
- ◆ Write down the high points in your child's life (even a small baby will have some of these – his cry, her eye).
- ◆ Decide on a format or theme for the eulogy.

### Some ideas:

- It could be a letter to those whom you want to care for her spirit. The theme could be an introduction to the child.
- *“Dear ones who are caring for the spirit of my child. I would like you to know these things about this special person...”*
- It could be a summary of how you came to understand the nature of this special child.
- *“Friends – Some say they understood their child from the first. Not I. I grew in understanding throughout the ten years of her life. My first thought on hearing her birth cry was .....*”
- You could start by thinking about your feelings when you first saw her and go on to describe all the other “first times.” First day at daycare, first birthday, first time she lost a board game, first words, first time she made you angry, etc.
- You could talk about your child in terms of the “colours” of her rainbow personality.
- You could just do what a great poet (Elizabeth Barrett Browning) did and say “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways ....” and take it from there.
- You could quote from some of the cards you have received.
- Organize your thoughts from the cards into the format.

You can write each point onto a card and then number your cards. Or write it into a computer.

Use large type and separate your paragraphs with lots of space so it is easy to read.

- ◆ Give special thought to the ending.

Quotes from a book that was meaningful to your child may turn up something wonderful. Look to some of the wise people who have written of life, death and the human spirit for verses or passages that speak to the heart. A hospital chaplain whom you know, a librarian or your spiritual leader may be able to help you find something suitable.

Keep it short and simple so that, even though you may read from your notes, you sound as if you are speaking to friends rather than reading an essay.

- ◆ Rehearse: read it out loud several times. Highlight the main points with a yellow marker.

Give a copy to your “back up person” so he is familiar with it. Make sure he knows the correct way to pronounce any names.

## \* Consider tributes

- ◆ Decide about the form of tributes

Many people will want to offer something to honour the spirit of your child. You may choose to let them do it in whatever way they choose or, you can suggest a way, such as the following:

*“If you would like to honour Jason:*

- *please send a donation to —; or*
- *“we would love to fill the church with flowers”; or*
- *“we are setting up a scholarship fund in his name”. Contributions can be made to ———*

- ◆ Decide how to inform people of your wishes

The simplest way is to include your wishes in an obituary notice if you are going to make one. You can also tell the friends, who will be calling to inform people of the service, about your wishes. You can ask the person conducting the service to make mention of this. You can make a little notice to put on a table at the place of the service.

## In the weeks and months after the death

Having supported your child through “the valley of the shadow of death,” you will now begin to climb the mountain of grief so that you can come again into the easier fields of life. If it is not part of your package, please ask the health professional or funeral home for the booklet called “Finding your way: grieving the death of your child” or some other helpful materials. (See also the resource list handout and Griefworks BC website: [www.griefworksbc.com](http://www.griefworksbc.com)).

Parent voice:

*In our family we all have a copy of Dad's eulogy to Molly. We all read it on the anniversary of her death when we light a candle for her. It marks the day and holds us in a common memory, as a family, wherever we are in the world.*

Parent voice:

*I made a memory book in the week after the death. I pasted in the pictures I had taken and wrote captions beneath them. I made a note of Brynne's favourite songs, books, foods. It is funny how we forget things we figured would never leave our memory – like the name of the book we read to him so many times, the song we sang together the day before he died. It was a healing activity at the time and I am so glad to have it now.*

There is a message about grief that says much about what has been, and what lies in the future:

“Tears water our growth.”

We wish you the courage to grow.

This pamphlet is the result of a collaboration between  
British Columbia's Children's Hospital  
and  
Canuck Place Children's Hospice

Information about ordering copies:

online: [www.cw.bc.ca/library/bookstore](http://www.cw.bc.ca/library/bookstore)

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BCCH - 1029



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