



Is your child ready to attend a funeral?

Allowing your children to attend a funeral is a very personal decision and few make it without guidance, writes Kath Walters.



Darren Eddy has been a funeral director for 25 years. Without exception, every family asks him the question: should we bring the children to the funeral?

Eddy, that national president of the Australian Funeral Directors Association, knows the answer is an intensely personal one. Nevertheless, he tries to reassure parents that attending a funeral is unlikely to cause children distress -- as long as they have the choice -- and will likely to be a positive experience.

Many parents disagree. They are worried that children will be overwhelmed, confused or frightened. They also worry that young children might disturb others.

The research does not support this view, however. In a study conducted by a British educational psychologist, Dr John Holland, a specialist in grief and children, reveals that attending funerals does not harm children.

Holland made a study of adults who had lost a parent while still at school. Of the 47% who attended the funeral, none reported any negative consequences. Two-thirds said it was a positive experience; they reported that they felt able to “say goodbye” and to “grasp reality”.

Melbourne-based grief counsellor, Bette Phillips, is a passionate advocate of demystifying death and grief. She helps families and communities recover after workplace deaths. “There is a lot of fear around grief and death,” she says. “The more our kids are exposed -- sensitively and carefully -- to death, the more they realise that grief is a natural emotion.”

Eddy agrees. In fact, children can sometimes show us the way. When his own Grandmother died, Eddy’s father declined the chance to view her in the casket. It was then that Eddy’s daughter, aged eight, stepped in. She had no fears (having been around funerals all her life). After getting on a chair to look into the casket, she ran out and took Eddy’s father by the hand. “She look beautiful,” she re-assured him. After initially hesitating, he followed the child’s lead and spent a precious half an hour saying goodbye.

Fears and choice

Few children would be so at home around a casket as Eddy’s daughter. However, prevented from seeing a coffin, the deceased, and even seriously-ill relatives, some children blame themselves, feel personally rejected, or dream up gruesome images in their minds. Eddy recalls: “One little boy, protected from seeing his dying grandfather, said sadly to his father, ‘Pop doesn’t want to see me’.”

In Holland’s study, the majority of respondents (53%) did not attend their parent’s funeral as children. The impact on them as adults was closely tied to the issue of choice. The 75% who later wished they had gone to the funeral -- reporting regret, exclusion, hurt and frustration -- were either forbidden or distracted from attending

the event. The 25% of non-attenders who experience no negative effects were those who made their own choice not to attend.

However, Phillips has a caveat: not all children – especially young ones – should go to the graveside for the burial. “Some little ones – 10 and under – might find it very frightening that the person in the coffin is covered up,” Phillips says. “It is very much a case of how mature your child is, what your child understands.”

Why children see death the way they do

Children are aware of death – they see insects die, or have pets that die, Eddy says. Nevertheless, families struggle to discuss death with children. “Just because we don’t talk about death, doesn’t mean we don’t communicate,” he says. (See box: “Tips for talking to kids about death”)

Pre-school children see death as temporary, while those aged six to nine see it as inevitable for everyone except themselves, according to the National Institute of Health (US).

Above 10, children realise that death takes us all, and teenagers often grapple with the philosophical issues raised by death. Individual experience, temperament and background also play a role. Children mature at different rates.

Grief involves many emotions including pain, sadness, anger, anxiety, loneliness and often a sense of shock, unreality and withdrawal.

Eddy is careful not to use “soft words” such as “Grandma has gone to sleep” or “gone away” because of likely misunderstandings. He uses simple words: “Grandma has died, which is sad, but that is what happens. We are all sad because we will miss her. It is okay to cry.”

Phillips finds some children (and adults) can express their feelings more easily in drawing or in play.

Preparing children for funerals

Explaining what happens at funerals helps children decide if they want to participate, and prepares them.

They need to know, for example, that there will be a lot of people, many will be sad, and some will be crying, including mum and dad. “They need to know that the reason people are sad is because the person who has died has left us now,” Phillips says.

Some funeral celebrants involve children in the ceremony,

and some facilities have play spaces for children.

Acknowledging that people believe different things about death can be comforting for children,” the Institute of Health says. “By indicating our acceptance and respect for others’ beliefs, we make it easier for our children to choose beliefs different from our own but which are more comforting to them.”

Violent or accidental deaths and suicides tend to have a broad community effect. The issues are the same when it comes to attending the funeral, but such deaths mean children are likely to overhear comments from many people. This puts the onus on parents to communicate with great sensitivity with their children.

Professional help

When parents feel overwhelmed, angry or unable to talk calmly with their children, professionals can help. “Family and friends have very different opinions,” Phillips says, and can complicate the picture. Grief counsellors, doctors, psychologists or members of the church can help.

If, after reading this story, you are in need of grief assistance, please contact your local doctor. If you need to talk to someone straight away call: Lifeline 13 11 14 (Australia local call) Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800 (Australia free call)

Tips for talking to children about death

1. Keep the language simple, age appropriate, and use as few words as you can.
2. Listen to the question and answer only what your child has asked, not more.
3. Be honest. Admit when you don’t know the answer to a question about death, funerals or your feelings.
4. Try not to apologise for your emotions. Instead, reassure children that it is okay to feel sad and cry when someone dies.
5. Encourage your children to other forms of expression, drawing or playing for example.

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