



PREPARING A CHILD FOR A FUNERAL, VIEWING, OR MEMORIAL

*Helping Children Know What to Expect Before a
Goodbye Ritual*

A funeral, viewing, visitation, or memorial can contain unfamiliar sights, sounds, emotions, and traditions. Preparation can reduce uncertainty and help a child feel more secure. Children do not need every detail, but they benefit from knowing what will happen, what they may see, who will be with them, and what choices they will have.

EXPLAIN THE EVENT BEFOREHAND

Use simple language to describe where the family is going and why. Explain whether there will be a casket or urn, music, prayers, speakers, photographs, flowers, or other traditions. Tell the child that people may cry, laugh while sharing memories, hug one another, or have many different reactions.

WHAT YOU MAY NOTICE

- The child may ask practical questions that seem unrelated to grief, such as where they will sit or what they will wear.
- They may want to know exactly what the body will look like or whether they must go near the casket.
- They may become more nervous as the event approaches even after initially wanting to attend.

GENTLE REMINDER

Do not surprise a child with a viewing. Explain what they may see before they enter the room and let them decide how close they want to be.

PREPARE FOR A VIEWING

If the child may see the body, explain that the person has died and the body no longer works. Describe visible changes honestly but gently. The body may look different, feel cool, and remain still. Let the child know they may look from a distance, go closer, touch the body if permitted, or choose not to view it.

WORDS THAT CAN HELP

Try: “You can decide how close you want to go.” “If you want to leave, tell me or Uncle Ben.” “People may be crying because they miss her.” “Nothing you see at the funeral can hurt the person who died, because their body cannot feel anything now.”

MAKE A PLAN FOR BREAKS

Show the child where they can go if they need quiet. Identify the adult who will leave with them and explain that taking a break is allowed. Bring a quiet activity, comfort object, snack, or other age-appropriate support if the setting permits.





INVITE PARTICIPATION WITHOUT PRESSURE

Some children appreciate having a role: choosing a song, placing a flower, drawing a picture, writing a note, carrying a photograph, or sharing a memory. Participation should be offered rather than required. A child may choose one role and decline another.

AFTER THE SERVICE

- Ask open, simple questions such as, “Was anything different from what you expected?” or “Is there anything you want to ask about what you saw?” Correct misunderstandings and allow the child to return to ordinary activity. They may process the experience gradually.
- REMEMBERING DEVELOPMENT MATTERS
- Young children often focus on concrete details and may need explanations repeated. Older children may worry about being watched, crying in public, or how peers will respond. Tailor preparation to the child's questions rather than giving a standard speech.

A THOUGHT TO CARRY WITH YOU

Preparation gives a child something grief often takes away: a sense of what is going to happen next.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

What part of the service is most likely to be unfamiliar to this child? What can you explain or show them beforehand to make that part more predictable?

WHEN MORE SUPPORT MAY HELP

When a death was violent, traumatic, or involved significant changes to the person's appearance, seek guidance before deciding what a child should see. A funeral professional or qualified child bereavement professional may help families prepare appropriately.

A GENTLE CLOSING

Preparation cannot remove sadness, but it can reduce unnecessary fear. When children know what to expect and who will stay with them, they can approach a goodbye ritual with greater security and choice.

What part of the service is most likely to be unfamiliar to this child? What can you explain or show them beforehand to make that part more predictable?

