

## ***PREPARING CHILDREN FOR FUNERALS***

Often people want to “protect” children from the harsh reality of a death. Yet, the child is part of the family for whom death causes a major change in their lives. So children should be drawn into discussions regarding the death and the funeral planning.

Adults often resist allowing children into this conversation because adults fear not being able to answer children’s questions. But experts recommend this involvement to help both adults and children with their grieving.

Communication about death is easier when a child feels that he or she has our permission to talk about a subject that is often not talked about, especially with children. We must deal with the inescapable fact of death, and so must our children. If we wish to help them, we must let them know that it is okay to talk about it. In fact, any discussion with the children will also aid adults in their own grief process.

Death should be explained to a child as simply and directly as possible by someone very close. But even more importantly, it is necessary to listen to the child and to consider the child’s feelings about this particular death or about death in general. Adults need to realize that the child’s understanding of death always depends upon his or her age, maturity and intelligence.

Younger children from ages three to five usually know very little, if anything, about death. But since they are very curious, they can have many questions that should be answered as simply, directly and truthfully as possible, especially without suggesting that death is reversible or has not really happened.

Children from ages five to nine have begun to understand that death is final, and their questions can often be harder to answer. But again, direct and truthful answers will help them confront the reality of death and cope with their own grief.

Older children, ten through the teenage years, might recognize death’s inevitability and also realize it could happen to them. Anger and guilt feelings can also occur in relation to a death, especially one within their family, friends or peer group. It is important to communicate that they were in no way responsible for the death.

When a death occurs, the children should be given the news in a way that gives them time to ask questions and includes them in the emotional experience of the whole family. They are an important part of the family and should be included when the family celebrates and grieves together.

Whether or not a particular child should be included in the funeral depends upon the child and the situation. If he or she is asking questions about the death, then they are probably old enough to be present at all the events of the wake and funeral. If the child is old enough to understand and wants to participate, being included may help accept the reality of death and offer a way to express grief in the company of family and friends. If a child prefers not to attend the funeral, it is not wise for the child to be coerced or made to feel guilty.

If a child is to attend a funeral, preparation should be given beforehand about what will be seen and heard before, during and after the service. The child should be aware that on such a sad occasion people will be expressing their sorrow in various ways and some will be crying.

If children need more assistance in answering the questions, funeral directors often have resources that can be used to help children understand and cope with their experience of death.