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Explaining Funerals, Burial and Cremation to children

It is easy for an adult to assume that a child will know what a funeral is and why we have them. In reality, few do, unless they have previously experienced the death of someone they know. Any information that they already have has probably come from the media or via overheard, usually misunderstood, conversations.

A good starting point is to talk about what a funeral is and its purpose. What you say will be influenced by your culture, beliefs or religion if you have one, so the following are just suggestions to give you the confidence to talk about this emotive subject in a way that feels right for you and your children. Do first check that the child understands what being dead means. A child who has not quite grasped the concept of “no life” may be distressed by the thought of someone being buried or burnt. See our Information Sheet *Explaining to young children that someone has died*.

The same principles apply that are in all the other CBC information sheets around this topic. These are: the importance of being honest, using the word “dead” rather than “lost” or “gone” and using simple language that a young child will understand.

Taking a child to a funeral

A very young child, toddler, or even a baby can be there with the rest of the family. Although they will not understand at the time, it is when older that children appreciate knowing that along with everyone else they were a part of this important event. Ask someone close to your child to join you in case the children get upset or become restless and want to go out. It is hard to have to deal with your own grief and theirs. Take along a favourite toy or book to occupy them. Let whoever is organising the funeral know that you will be taking young children.

Older children can be given the choice to attend. As long as a child is prepared for what is going to happen and what they will see, it is a helpful experience. Of the children that we work with at CBC, none have regretted going to the funeral. Those who were not given the option deeply resent not being included, despite this decision having been made with the best of intentions.

If your children chose not to attend, remember that there are other alternatives such as a private family farewell or doing something special to remember the person who has died.

Involving children in the planning

If someone close has died, try to involve the children as much as possible. This helps them to feel included and generates opportunities to share thoughts and feelings. Young children may chose to make a drawing or card which could be placed on the coffin. Ask them if they have a favourite poem or a song they would like included. If possible, take them along in advance for a quick look at where the funeral is taking place. This will help them to feel more secure and better prepared because they know what to expect.

What is a Funeral and why do we have them?

Below are suggestions of words you may wish to use.

When someone dies we have a special ceremony called a Funeral. Because Granny has died, we are going to have one just for her. At the funeral, everyone can get together to remember things Granny did, to think about how much we loved her, and to say a very special goodbye to her.

We are going to have the funeral at.....on.....

You can have a think about if you would like to be there, you do not have to decide right now and if you change your mind that is OK. You can ask any questions you want, I will try to answer or if I don't know, we can ask the man who is helping us, he is called a funeral director.

What happens at a funeral?

At the funeral, Granny's body will be in a special box called a coffin. The coffin will have a lid on it and granny's dead body will be inside the coffin. Remember, because she is dead and no longer alive, granny's body doesn't work and she does not need her body anymore. The coffin will be at the front and it will be made of brown wood with shiny handles (describe whatever applies).

At the funeral we will sing some hymns (songs). You can help us to choose which ones if you like. We will also ask people to say something about Granny, things such as how she loved growing flowers and how she wasn't very good at singing but sang anyway. Can you think of any stories that we can tell about her? Some people get very sad at funerals and cry a little, some people cry a lot, others don't cry at all. It doesn't matter who does what.

This may well be as much information as the child needs for now. However, they may ask about what happens afterwards. How you reply will depend on whether there is to be a burial or cremation.

Burial

At the end of the funeral, the coffin will be taken to the graveyard (cemetery). In the graveyard (cemetery) a very deep hole will have been dug. This is called a grave. The coffin will be gently lowered into the grave and covered up with earth. Eventually, grass will grow on top of it.

When we feel ready we can put a headstone on the grave. This will have Granny's name on it so that everyone will know where her body is buried. We can visit the grave sometimes to think about and remember Granny.

Cremation

What you say about cremation needs careful thought and will be influenced by the age of the child. Some children will be affected by the use of the words burnt or burning as they associate fire with fear and danger. Two approaches are suggested below, one less direct than the other.

1. Granny's body will be turned into soft powdery ashes at the crematorium. The ashes are then put into a pot called an urn. Some people scatter the ashes somewhere very special to the person who has died. Or we can bury the ashes in the ground, we do not have to decide this now. We can decide together what we want to do with Granny's ashes.

2. At the end of the funeral, some curtains will be drawn around the coffin and we will not see it again. After everyone has gone the coffin, with the dead body, is put into a special, very hot oven to be burnt and turned into ash. We do not watch this bit. The ashes are then put into a special pot called an urn. Some people scatter the ashes somewhere very special to the person who has died. Or we can bury them in the ground, we do not have to decide this now. We can decide together what we want to do with Granny's ashes.

Visiting the Burial Place

Some children find visiting the grave or place where ashes are scattered comforting. Others view graveyards and cemeteries as frightening or unwelcoming places. Reassure them that films and television programmes that show graveyards as scary places, full of ghosts, are not the real thing.

Others can find it bewildering, especially if they are still a bit confused with the meaning of being dead and where dead bodies go. If your beliefs support the concept of heaven, this can be comforting as children, Christian or not, associate heaven with safety and peace. However, do make sure that you say Granny has died and gone to heaven. See Information sheet *Explaining To Young Children That Someone Has Died*.

Ask the child if they would like to visit the graveside, and if so, suggest that they leave some flowers or a memento. Some families integrate the visit into a walk or some other activity. This helps to normalize the visit. A child who clearly does not want to go should not be forced.

The following are suggestions of resources to help with your explanations

Someone I know Has Died by Trish Phillips

This activity book is designed to be used with very young children who need help to understand what being dead means, what we do and how we might feel when someone dies. Some pages are interactive in ways familiar to young children, making it very easy for a child to engage with. To be used with an adult, guidance notes are included. Only available from the Child Bereavement Charity.

Cost £9.99.

www.childbereavement.org.uk/For/Shop/ForFamilies/Books/ChildrenYoungPeople

Someone Very Important Has Just Died by Mary Turner

A simple, short booklet with words to help you explain death, burials, cremations and what happens at a funeral. Available from www.jkp.com Tel: 020 7833 2307

Cost £12.99