

Advice on Funeral Attendance

Take-Home Message

It's important to offer children a chance to attend funeral or memorial services after the death of a family member or a loved one. Most of the time, it's better for children if they do attend. School personnel often have a chance to play a vital role in helping families make good choices about children's participation in services.

Families may ask the school for advice on this matter. Often, school personnel are the only professionals who interact with families before the funeral.

Why School Personnel?

Parents often notify schools immediately after the death of a family member and before the funeral occurs. School personnel may be the only professionals who have the opportunity to provide advice to parents about the benefits of allowing children to participate in the funeral. They can help families understand how to best prepare and support children through the experience.

Parents' Wishes

Some parents are clear that they want to include their children in the funeral or memorial service of a family member, or support their children in attending the funeral of a friend. Other parents hesitate. They may wish to protect their children from the distress of seeing others expressing grief. They may feel their children are too young to understand or benefit from going to the funeral.

Ideally, children will make their own decisions about funeral attendance. Most of the time, it will be better if they do attend.



Benefits for Children

There are a number of benefits for children who attend funeral or memorial services.

- They feel included and affirmed.
- They are comforted by the support of friends and family. They may also gain support from the family's spiritual community.
- They learn more about their own grief when they see the different ways people grieve and give and seek support.
- They appreciate participating in an important event or ritual.

Problems may develop when children are not included.

- They may feel hurt, discounted, excluded, or unimportant.
- They often create fantasies that are far more frightening than what actually occurs. They may wonder what could possibly be so awful about the services or what is done to the body of their family member or friend when they are not allowed to be there.

Guidelines for Families

It is important for children to understand beforehand what is likely to occur at the funeral. Teachers can share the following guidelines with families to help them prepare and support children attending services.

- *Explain what will happen.* In simple terms, describe what the service will be like. For example, talk about where it will be held, who will be there, the sequence of events, and what people might say or do. Will there be laughter? Tears? Stories? Music and singing? Will the casket be present? Will it be an open casket? Will there be a funeral procession or a graveside service?
- *Answer questions.* Invite children to ask questions at any point over the days leading up to, as well as during and after the service. Check in with children several times over this period.
- *Let children decide.* Give children choices—to attend the services or not, to participate actively or sit quietly, or to stay for the entire service or part of it. It's helpful to tell children they can leave the service at any point, or take a break for a short time if they wish.
- *Pair an adult with each child.* Especially for young children and preteens, find an adult who can stay with the child throughout the service. This adult can answer questions, provide support and comfort, and accompany the child if

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he or she wishes to leave for a period of time. Ideally, this will be someone known to the child, but not deeply affected by the death. A babysitter or neighbor often works well. Teachers can also offer to fulfill this role.

- *Allow options.* Help children find ways to be present at the service that feel safe and meaningful. Young children might want to play quietly on one side of the room. Teens might want to invite a close friend to sit with them in the family section.
- *Offer a role.* When the service is for a family member, offer the child an opportunity to play a role in the service. Choose simple options that are a good match for the child's age and personality. It might be helpful to select music, read a poem, pass out memorial cards, light candles, or perform some other activity. It's also fine if the child prefers not to participate actively in the service.
- *Check in afterward.* Ask children what they thought of the service and how they are feeling about it. Find out if they have any questions. Check in periodically over several days. Teachers can also check in with students after they have attended a service.

Attendance of School Personnel

Most families are open to, and appreciative of, members of the school community attending their family member's funeral. Others may prefer smaller, more private funerals with only family members attending. The first step is to consult with the family about school personnel (and others) attending the funeral and to follow the family's wishes.

When school personnel attend funerals, they demonstrate to grieving students and their families that the school is caring and concerned. It helps establish school personnel as safe people for students to talk with about thoughts, feelings, and questions as their grief progresses.

Some school personnel worry they will not be "strong," and will show too much emotion at the funeral. Genuine displays of emotions, such as becoming tearful or displaying sadness, show children that it is okay to express emotions. This models for children that people can experience grief and still cope with these strong feelings.

Just being present communicates a great deal to students. They may be more likely to reach out to these staff members at a future time.

Attendance of Peers

School policies should be developed that facilitate the attendance of interested students and staff at the funeral of someone close to them. If the funeral takes place during school hours, parental permission to attend will be necessary. For young children, it may be most appropriate to ask parents to personally accompany their children to the services.

When the death involves a member of the school community, such as a student or staff member, consideration should be given to hiring substitute teachers and making arrangements for coverage of other personnel. It may be helpful to modify the school schedule so that attendance does not create an academic burden on students. However, students and staff should not feel any obligation to attend the funeral. Acceptable alternative activities can be provided for those who prefer to stay at school.

If many students and staff are likely to attend, it will be important to talk with the family so they can be prepared. Explore the possibilities that will best serve both the grieving family and the school community. The family may be able to arrange visitation hours outside of school time, for example. They may choose to move the services to a larger location.

In some cases, there may not be enough room at the funeral location for all who wish to attend. Schools can plan alternative gestures for interested students and staff. They might gather outside the facility before the service to show their caring and remembrance to the family, or do activities in small groups at the school that allow them to share their thoughts with each other and possibly with the family of the deceased.

We discourage the use of school buildings for funeral services, especially if the body of the deceased will be present. This may establish difficult associations with that space for students and staff in the future. The exception would be schools with religious affiliations that have an on-site place for worship, such as a chapel or temple.

LEAD FOUNDING MEMBERS



FOUNDING MEMBERS



For more information
 on supporting grieving
 students, refer to
*The Grieving Student:
 A Teacher's Guide*
 by David Schonfeld and
 Marcia Quackenbush.

