

(Photo by Anna Groot)

“It’s Not a Place for Children”

Overcoming Barriers to Create Child-Inclusive Funerals

Who am I and why am I talking to you?



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Setting the national standard
INSTITUTE OF CIVIL FUNERALS

Why Include Children in Funerals?

Acceptance and understanding of what has happened

Inclusion - being recognised as a part of a group of mourners

Autonomy and control - allowing children to make their own choices

Winston's Wish

"At Winston's Wish, we have listened to and supported thousands of children and young people across the years. We have spoken to children who chose to attend the funeral of someone important and were glad they did. We have spoken to children who chose not to attend and had no regrets. We have never spoken to a child who attended a funeral and wished they hadn't… but we have spoken to very many children who did not have the chance to attend and deeply regret it."

Activity: 10-15 mins

Read the scenario from the envelope on your table.

In groups, discuss and record answers to the following questions:

How do you prepare the young people before the funeral?

How do you make them feel included in the funeral?

What possible pitfalls/problems/barriers to attendance can you foresee?

Feedback

A baby girl is stillborn at 36 weeks, there are 2 older half-siblings: a boy aged 3 (mum's – lives with them permanently) and a girl aged 7 (dad's, has shared custody). No family conflict. Cremation with service at crematorium chapel, family only.

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Feedback

The mother of two children aged 8 (boy) and 13 (girl) has died after having lived with cancer for 12 months. She was happily married. She also has 2 nephews and a niece, all of primary school age, who she saw regularly. Funeral service in a village hall followed by a burial at nearby cemetery, large congregation.

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Feedback

A teenage boy (14) has died following a cancer diagnosis. It was a short illness. He has a brother 1 year younger who was his sidekick and an 8yo half-sister. Dad not present, mum's partner was very close to him and is the father of his sister. He also has a lot of cousins of varying ages. He was a bit of a rogue! Socially deprived area. Cremation with double-slot service at crematorium chapel, large congregation which is likely to include many teens and his girlfriend.

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Feedback

A man aged 78 has died following a short illness. Father of 3, grandad of 7 (age range 24-10). He saw the nearest ones geographically (age 13, and 10yo twins) regularly and looked after the oldest 2 (now adults) when they were little. Two others (16 and 12) live two hours away and saw him 3/4 times a year. Wife died 3 years ago and the youngest four grandchildren did not attend the funeral. Celebration of life at local venue followed by DC the next day, 40-50 attending, family and friends.

How do you prepare the young people before the funeral?

How do you make them feel included in the funeral?

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Feedback

A woman aged 71 has died having lived with dementia for 3 years. She was physically fit and her death was unexpected after a swift decline. She has 4 granddaughters (from two families) aged 24 (autism diagnosis), 16, 13 (anxiety) and 10. All four were very close to her and are very upset by her death. Cremation with service at crematorium chapel, 20-30 attending, mainly family.

How do you prepare the young people before the funeral?

How do you make them feel included in the funeral?

What possible pitfalls/problems/barriers to attendance can you foresee?

Creating Child-Inclusive Funerals



(Image from Good Funeral Guide photoshoot)

Potential Barriers

Parental Anxiety - “It’s not a place for children”

Discuss with the person next to you:
Your own child wants to go to a funeral. What are your concerns?

Parents may worry about:

- Being upset in front of the children
- Disruption – consider the age and stage of children, as well as any SEND

Sunbeams guidance: *“If they decide that they would like to go it may be helpful to have an adult who is known to the children and trusted by them but who is perhaps not quite as affected by the death who will be able to take them out of the service and distract them if they become bored or restless or just want to leave. Children who are old enough to go to school have learned to be able to sit and concentrate for short periods. They will know that this is a special occasion even if there are still some things they do not fully understand. Younger children may find it helpful if they can take their favourite toy.”*

Potential Barriers

Children's Anxiety

- The coffin
- How to deal with their parent/carer being upset
- Black and/or formal clothing

Preparation - Social Stories

Hello, Dylan, my name is Kirsty.



I am sending you this booklet because your Nan has died and I am going to tell you what happens on the day of her funeral.

Hello, Taylor and Harry, my name is Kirsty.



I will be leading the service for your Nan's funeral.

I'm sending you this booklet to tell you a bit about what will happen on the day so that you know what to expect.

If you choose to go to the funeral, on Monday you will go to Rotherham Crematorium with your family and I will be there to meet you outside.



Your Nan's coffin will go to the funeral in the back of a big black car called a hearse. It looks like this:



You don't need to worry about Nan being in the coffin, because when someone dies, their body stops working and they can't feel anything anymore.

I will go in first to the chapel and some people will carry your Nan, in her coffin, behind me. You will follow them together with your family and your Nan's friends.



Inside the chapel, everyone will sit down and I will talk about your Nan. There will be some music, Sarah will read a poem and then we will say goodbye to Nan all together. Her coffin will go on the altar in the middle of this picture.

People there, including your mum and dad, might get upset and cry because your Nan has died. This is normal, it's ok to be upset.

They might laugh a bit as well and that's normal too, because your Nan could be funny and they're remembering everything about her.

When people arrive at the crematorium on Tuesday this is where they will gather. I will already be there and will meet you outside, if you choose to come.



Your Nan's coffin will go to the funeral in the back of a specially-designed car called a hearse. You may have seen one before but, in case you haven't, it looks like this:



I will lead the bearers, who carry your Nan in her coffin, into the chapel. You and your family will follow behind them and the funeral director, John, will show you to your seats.



The service will consist of a eulogy (the story of her life), some music and poems, and the committal (the part of the service where we'll say goodbye to her all together). The coffin will be on the altar (called the catafalque) at the front.

You may expect that the service will be very solemn, but this isn't usually the case. Of course you will feel sadness and it's likely that people will cry. But they'll probably smile or laugh a bit too, and that's perfectly normal and fine. After all, we're there to remember Nan's life, and you all have a lot of happy memories of her.

When someone you love dies, you don't stop loving them. It's good to remember the happy times you spent with your Nan, like when she took you to feed the ducks.

When you feel sad, talk to adults that you trust. They will probably be missing your Nan too.

If there's anything you would like to tell me about your Nan to include in the funeral, or if you want to ask me anything, ask your mum or dad to call me.



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When someone you love dies, you don't stop loving them – that relationship is always part of you.

It's normal to be sad or even angry sometimes, but it's also normal for these feelings to come and go: you won't be sad all the time. Everyone experiences grief differently – there's no right or wrong way to feel.

Don't be afraid to talk to your family or other people you trust about your grief. They will probably be missing your _____ too.

If you have any memories you'd like to share or if you want to ask any questions, you can call or text me. Your _____ have my contact details.



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Preparation – Online Resources

https://www.childbereavementuk.org/

https://www.rotherhamhospice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/ONLINE-VERSION-Should-My-Child-Attend-a-Funeral-1.pdf

Connection Points

Practical ideas and small acts that allow children to safely navigate, understand and participate in a funeral ceremony. Examples include:

- **Honest Conversations:** Giving children clear, age-appropriate answers to their questions about what happens after someone dies.
- **Visual Familiarity:** Offering children the gentle opportunity to see the crematorium and coffin beforehand so it is less frightening during the service.
- **Active Involvement:** Allowing children to contribute to the ceremony by choice, in whatever way suits them.

Active Involvement

- **Collect their memories:** ensure that any children at the service hear a story or memory they are involved in or can directly relate to, to make it relevant to them – this is their person too.

- **Select Content:** choose a reading or a piece of music to use in the service; images for OoS or slideshow.

- **Multiple Children:** think of ways to provide opportunities for all to be involved **if they wish** e.g during reflective music, placing flowers on coffin or a photo/note/drawing in a Memory Basket.

Active Involvement - Physical



- Carrying or leading the coffin
- Carrying and placing floral arrangements
- Decorating the coffin
- Reading a poem/playing music
- Giving out OoS booklets
- Pressing the buttons!

Alternative Connection Points

If children choose not to attend the funeral, we can still support them in creating connection points by suggesting alternatives. They could:

- **Contribute content** and know that this will be included in the funeral.
- **Write a goodbye letter** to place in the coffin.
- **Memory activities** at the wake, e.g. memory jar, scrapbook, beaded bracelets.
- **Memory activities** at home, e.g. light a candle, create a memory garden.
- **View the body** with careful support from family and FD.

Resources

Good Books

- KS1 (age 4-7): No Matter What by Debi Gliori, The Invisible String by Patrice Karst, Love Never Dies by Clare Shaw
- KS2 (age 8-12): Badger's Parting Gifts by Susan Varley, Michael Rosen's Sad Book, The Heart in the Bottle by Oliver Jeffers, Love Never Dies by Clare Shaw
- Teens/young adults: Mind Full of Grief by Clare Shaw, Letters From the Grief Club by Beth French and Kate Moreton

Child Bereavement UK
REBUILDING LIVES TOGETHER

https://www.childbereavementuk.org/

Sunbeams
Children's Bereavement Support

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Activity – remaining time!

Using the resources provided, make a start on producing a resource that you can use with families/children to help them be involved in the funeral. This could be:

- Social story booklet
- Questionnaire to collect memories/stories
- Reading list of age-appropriate books and websites
- Collection of memory activities for wakes
- Anything else that you feel would be useful in improving your practice

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Summary – some Dos and Don’ts

Don’t make assumptions

Do engage with children wherever possible

Do establish age/stage

Do send preparation resources beforehand

Don’t ignore pitfalls and anxieties, but…

Do encourage families to allow children a choice

Do make children feel included

Do suggest alternative connection points

Thank you!

If you're willing to share your creations, please email with the subject heading 'children's resources' to:

admin@iocf.org.uk

