A RESOURCE FROM NACG MEMBERS

NACG
NATIONAL ALLIANCE FOR CHILDREN'S GRIEF

CHILDREN AND END OF LIFE MEMORIALS/RITUALS

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Introduction

End of life memorials and rituals that follow the death of someone loved are very important. They mark the transition from life to death and honor the life of the deceased. In addition, memorials and rituals allow family, friends and the community to gather together and support one another.

These events are important as they offer support, comfort, and meaning for those grieving and provide a safe venue for the physical and emotional expression of grief.

Tips for the Conversation

Use concrete language. When talking with a child about death, one of the first considerations is the child understands what it means when we say their person has died. Be sure to use concrete language in your conversation. For example, *"(Person's Name) body stopped working and that means they died."*

Let a child's questions lead the conversation. It is critically important we are honest with children about how their person died. Remember, this is their story too and we all deserve the truth. Withholding information from the child can impact the trust and relationship between you and the child.

Use simple, clear age-appropriate language. It is important to consider the child's age and development, as every child is different. Age and experience play a role in how they will react to the news that someone has died. View the NACG Developmental Understandings resource to learn more about grief and children by age group.

Children may ask questions over and over again. This is a natural part of their process in learning about death and its permanence. Keep answering questions honestly and consistently. They are trying to better understand. Each time you answer they will gain more insight. As their understanding of death grows, the child's questions may change.

When you are asked a question you don't know the answer to, it is okay to say "I don't know." If there is someone you can ask to find out the answer, do so and let them know what you learned in ways they can understand. If it is a question that can't be answered, reply with, *"That is a great question. I am not sure, I wish I understood"*. In doing so, you are validating their questions and feelings and allowing for exploration, which helps a child who is grieving.

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Talking to Children & Teens about End of Life Memorials/Rituals

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7 Tips for Talking to Bereaved Children & Teens about End of Life Memorials/Rituals

Grief is ongoing. Kids continue to grieve through each developmental stage and milestone.

Validation is key. There is no such thing as good or bad feelings - feelings are just feelings. Avoid labeling certain feelings as bad, such as anger, sadness, or grief. Instead, discuss with kids certain feelings may be harder or more difficult to understand or process, but encourage them to talk to you about them.

Talk about the death. Help them understand the death is a normal and natural process. Normalizing the process helps them better understand their grief.

Use simple, direct language. Use the words: death, dying and died. Using other words in place of "dead" can confuse the child (passed away, lost, etc.). They need simple and direct language. For example, instead of "passed away", say "someone has died".

Grief is shaped by culture. Different cultures and families have a variety of traditions, rituals and beliefs regarding end of life ceremonies, as well as their views on grief. Consider sharing your family's traditions and rituals as part of the conversation.

Support their decisions. Once you have had the opportunity to discuss what's ahead, give the child or teen permission to decide whether they attend any services. Support them in the decisions they make. Remind them they can choose to be a part of some, but not all.

Talking to Children of All Ages

2-5 years: Respond with simple, repeated answers to their questions. Be truthful.

6-8 years: Focus on simple, direct explanations. The child may be curious about death and understand finality. Kids in this age group may avoid asking questions as a way to protect the adults in their life. Provide them with opportunities to ask questions.

8-12 years: Conversations should acknowledge, reflect, validate, and reassure. Be honest. Support them with information and answers to questions. This age group may also avoid asking questions as a way to protect the adults in their life. Provide them with opportunities to ask questions.

13+: Conversations should acknowledge, reflect, validate, and reassure. Be open and honest. Respect privacy and listen without judgement. Be attentive and support their searching for answers.

It is helpful to a child of any age for you to model good coping skills. View NACG's Developmental Understandings Resource for more information.

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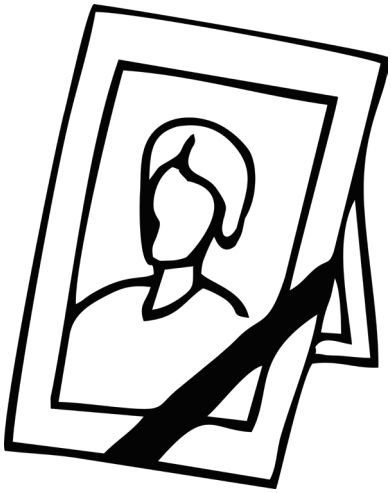
What Happens to the Body

Children are naturally interested in learning what happens to a body after death. One explanation is after someone dies, the family must take care of their body. The most common options for the final disposition of the body is burial or cremation. Whether the body is buried or cremated, the end result is the same: the body changes to "ashes" – or only the bones remain.

If the person's body is cremated or buried, it is helpful to prepare a child and talk to them about what will take place and what they can expect to see and experience at the funeral/memorial service. For example, let the child know some people may be laughing and telling funny stories, some may be crying, and some may show no emotion.

Assure the child there are no "right" or "wrong" ways to feel after someone has died. When we can properly prepare the child for what they will experience, they will be less likely to be afraid or uncomfortable in this new environment.



Example of how to explain visitation:
A time to go say goodbye to the body. You may see the body in the casket or an urn.

Example of how to explain funeral/ memorial service:
A goodbye ritual where the person is honored. Stories and religious customs may be included.

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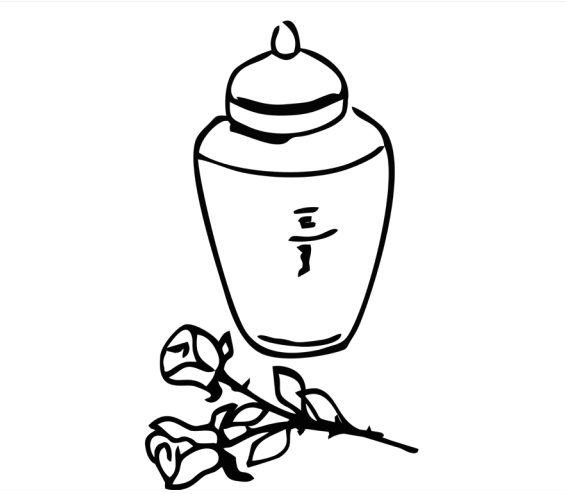
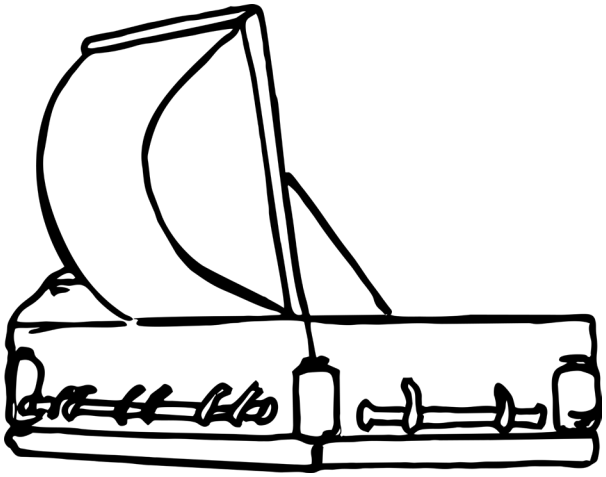
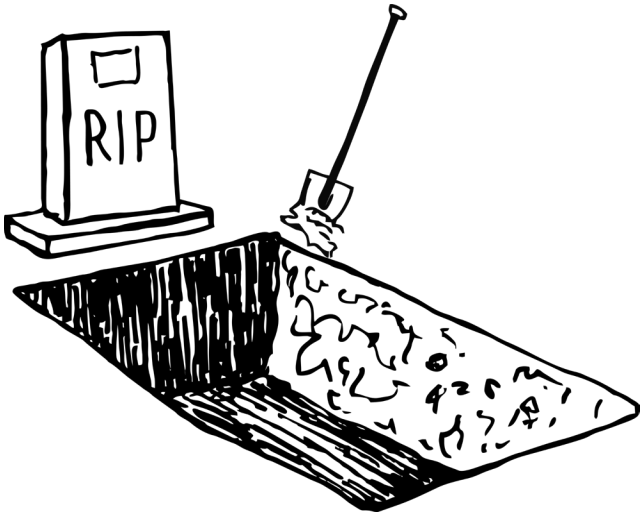
Example of how to explain the process of cremation:
The person's body is placed into a special box and then taken to the crematory. There, the box with the person's body is placed into a chamber. The cremation chamber gets very, very hot, and the heat changes the person's body and what is left are the bones or ashes. An Urn is a special container used to hold a person's ashes. Sometimes you will hear these described as cremated remains.





Example of how to explain the process of an open casket:
The body will be laying still, with eyes closed. The body will be room temperature which will make it feel cold when touched. The body can no longer feel cold, hurt, or fear.

Example of how to explain the process of a burial:
The person's body is placed into a special box called a casket and then taken to a cemetery. There will be a place at the cemetery called a gravesite where the casket will be lowered into the ground and covered. This site will be marked with a gravestone or a headstone with the name of the person who is buried in the gravesite.



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Viewing the Body

It is important to describe to the child what they will be seeing when viewing the body. Consider using the senses approach to help guide the conversation by discussing what the child may see, hear, touch, and smell.

Discuss what the child will see. Describe the room and how their person's body looks now – i.e., 'in a special box called a casket'; or 'on a special table with a pillow and covered with a blanket'.

Discuss what the body will look like. Clarify that their person will look like they are sleeping: lying down with eyes closed, but this isn't the same as sleeping. When adults tell children that their deceased loved one is "sleeping," it may cause confusion for the child.

Discuss what the body will feel like. Talk about what it will feel like if they touch the body. The body will be room temperature which will make it feel cold when touched. If the person is embalmed, let the child know that the skin will feel more firm because of the preparations made to the body to get it ready for the services.

Answer questions and concerns. Ask the child if they have any questions or worries. Answer honestly.

Respect and honor the child's decision. After getting all of the information and questions answered, if a child decides they do not want to see their person's body, it needs to be respected and validated. Let the child take the lead as to when they are ready to enter the room. Give the child control over how close they would like to be to the body and respect and honor the child's decision.

If this is before a visitation or wake, there are also other opportunities for the child to change their mind.

Options if the child does not attend or see the body. Talk with the person overseeing the services to see if you can take a picture of the deceased person, their hands, place something from the child in the casket, etc.

Bring home mementos like the program or folder from the service so the child can have a keepsake. Share with them some of the things you observed or remember, who was there, songs played, etc.

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The End of Life Ceremony

Explain beforehand what the end of life ceremony will include and any expectations [i.e., specific dress, appropriate and inappropriate behavior, rituals they may see and can or cannot partake in].

To the best of your ability, explain the why behind the type of ceremony. Children deserve and like to know the why behind things. This can be an opportunity to educate your child (and yourself) on cultural practices differing from your own. If appropriate, ask the child how they want to be involved in the services and follow their lead.

You may also consider a pre-walk through of the funeral home, during this time, you may take the opportunity to:

- Explain the order of the day.
- Explain to the child where they and their family will sit.
- Explain what the child will see.
- Make sure kids know where they can take a break and where the bathrooms are located.
- Consider establishing a point person to support the child or teen (family, friend, or professional) and designate a seat for them.

Emotions

Remind children of the following:

- No two people grieve the same.
- All emotions are okay and normal.
- It is normal for our bodies to react to the loss, too. The child may experience physical symptoms, for example, stomachaches, headaches, or shortness of breath.

Suggestions for navigating emotions:

- Utilize a care bag: crunchy snack, drink, coloring pages/pencils, gum, lollipop/ squeeze pouch, self-object: blanket, stuffed animal, something special from the person who died.
- Talk about it.
- Take a break and move.
- Have a point person for the child(ren).

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When to Seek Additional Support

After a death, it is essential to monitor changes in frequency, intensity, and duration of family members' behaviors. Noticeable changes may require additional support from an experienced, trained professional. Below are some examples of changes to look for:

- Inability to go to work or school
- Difficulties in relationships
- Disproportionate anger or irritability
- Increased health issues
- Sleep problems or nightmares
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Social withdrawal
- Self-harm, suicidal thoughts, or suicidal ideation

Sometimes family members may want to connect with others for additional support. Connecting family members with peer support groups, camps, or another person with a similar loss can help provide an added layer of support. These outside connections provide the griever with an opportunity to learn new perspectives on grief, coping, and healing.

Connecting with others allows people who are grieving the opportunity to share their stories, understand they are not alone, and validate and normalize their experience. It is important to embrace a family members' readiness, as well as the type of support needed. Needs may vary among family members throughout their grief journey.

You can find additional grief support in your area by visiting www.nacg.org/find-support.

Remember, this is an ongoing conversation. Children will continue to process the death and grieve as they continue to develop. As children grow and change, their concept and understanding of death also grows and changes.

There is an expression that children "grow with grief". This is especially evident at milestones in the child's life where the absence of the person who died is felt more strongly.

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The Memorial or Ritual

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End of life ceremonies include, but are not limited to: wakes, viewings/visitations, memorial services, graveside burials, internment, scattering of ashes (cremated remains), church services, masses, funerals, receptions, and end of life celebrations.

There is no one correct way to commemorate the death of a loved one. Culture, religion, and spiritual views often play a role in how a family or community decides to commemorate someone's death.

Sometimes a person may include their wishes regarding how they would like their family and friends to celebrate or commemorate them in their will or other plan. Other times, death can be sudden or unexpected, so the person's family and friends have to decide if and how they would like to hold an end of life ceremony.

Depending on who the end of life ceremony is for, ask yourself and be honest about whether or not it may be helpful to have a family member or friend stay with your child(ren) throughout the ceremony. Non-immediate family members, friends, and those in your support system who are looking for ways to help are good options to assist in this role as their companion.

This allows you to engage in the ceremony, be more present, and relieves you of the responsibility of making sure your child is okay throughout the process. Sit with your child beforehand to decide who their companion will be and include them in the decision.

Remember you and your child can choose which rituals and aspects of the end of life ceremony the child will participate in. Not all rituals are appropriate for all children - it depends upon their ability to focus and desire to participate.

Fortunately, it does not have to be all or nothing. It's okay for a child to decide not to participate in an aspect of the ceremony. For example, children under the age of four may not do as well during a formal ceremony like a funeral or mass service, but they could be content at a less formal service like a visitation or celebration of life.

Consider including the child/teen in the planning for the end of life ritual.
Consider inviting the child to help make decisions. This gives them the opportunity to be involved and gives them some sense of control. They can help pick music, photos to display, the casket/urn color, etc.

Another way to involve children is to invite them to draw a picture or write a letter to place in the casket or be cremated with their loved one. The child could read the letter at the service or with other family members if they would like to share it.

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Ways for Children to Participate in End of Life Ceremonies & Rituals

Reading A Letter, Poem, or Passage From a Spiritual Text

Playing, Singing, or Choosing Music

Displaying Artwork, Putting Something Inside The Casket, Grave, Etc.

Serving as a Pallbearer

Passing Out Ceremony Programs

Choosing a Special Color for Everyone to Wear In Honor of a Loved One

Lighting a Candle

> Remember you and your child can choose which rituals and aspects of the end of life ceremony the child will participate in.

If there are opportunities for the child to be involved in the ceremony, talk through those opportunities with them beforehand. Reassure them it's okay to change their mind at any point. It may help to have a back-up plan if they are struggling or decide they no longer want to participate in certain aspects of the ceremony.

Additional tips

- Offer to stand with the child as they read, sing, play music, etc., if they decide to participate in the ceremony.
- Validate and normalize if you or your child need to take breaks at any point during the ceremony. Show them a space they can go to should they (or you) need a break during the services.
- Arrive early to the service to give you and your child plenty of time to get acclimated to the new environment.
- If applicable, introduce the child to the person in charge of running aspects of the ceremony or service (example: Funeral Director, Celebrant, etc.) who can answer any additional questions about the process.
- Check-in with your child as you arrive and throughout the process. Ask what questions they have and encourage them to write things down throughout the ceremony for you all to process afterward together.

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Alternative ideas if the child cannot attend the ceremony
(due to restrictions, inability to travel, family dynamics, cultural considerations, etc.):

- If the service will be live-streamed, watch the service live or at a later time together.
- Have the child plan a service of their own. They can do it at the same time the person's ceremony would have been or on a special day/time.
- Consider involving the child in the selection of a specific day. You could potentially coordinate with other family members, to do it together over video call. During the ceremony, consider having everyone share their favorite memories of a loved one who died.
- Light a candle at a designated time in honor of the person who died.
- Visit the gravesite or other special place to leave a small keepsake, such as a decorated rock.
- Ask the child what they would like to do to honor their person and get creative!

After the Memorial or Ritual

- Children will grieve differently throughout different developmental stages and milestones. It is important to check in with your child periodically and talk about their experience, along with answering any questions they may have.
- Put away any item you saved from the funeral/ritual for safekeeping.

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Remembrance Items

Keep items that belonged to the person who died for children to keep with them or create something to remind them of their special person.

Blanket, stuffed animal or pillow made out of the person's clothing
It is important to make sure the child is ready for the clothes to be cut up. Ask them if they would like to be involved in the process.

Handkerchief or other personal item

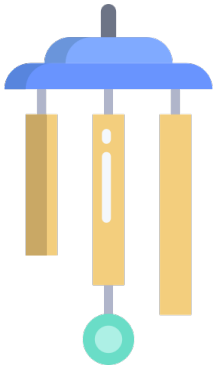
Clothing
Clothing that the child can wear or wrap up in during times they miss the person.

Memory Stone
Create/decorate a memory stone and put in a special place.

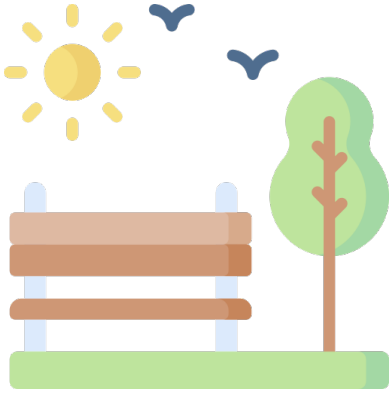
Framed photo of the person who died

Small urn of ashes.
Tip: Create a space where the urn can sit where the child feels it is best for them but also safe from damage.

Windchime
Hang a windchime where when the music plays, you can think of the person who died.



Plant a tree
Plant a tree in memory of the person who died.
Tip: If planting a tree, think of whether this is a place you know you can always return to.



Memorial bench
Dedicate a memorial bench, place a garden marker or plaque in remembrance of the person who died.

Jewelry
Jewelry such as necklaces, watches, rings the child can hold onto to remember the person. There are many options available to memorialize the person who died with jewelry, including those incorporating ashes and fingerprints of their person.

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Remembrance Activities

These can be something you do once or can be done multiple times on special anniversaries of birthdays, holidays, or other special occasions.

Light a candle. Light a candle: Remind children lighting a candle can offer the comfort of thinking about the person who died. Children can also decorate the candle holder with words or pictures of the person who died.

Write a note to the person who died. You can have time with friends and family where you write notes to the person who died. Consider reading them aloud if they are comforable sharing.

Host a Remembrance Event. Family and friends join together and have a personal time of reflection of the person who died (in-person or virtually).

Create a memory book of letters from others about the person who died. Have others who knew their person write a letter of what that person meant to them or a special story they would like to share. This can be something special the child and family can keep for a lifetime.

Share a memory. Telling stories and sharing memories is a great way to continue to feel connected to the person who died.

Honor the deceased through charitable deeds. Participate in a walk or race, start a foundation, or make a donation**. Consider a fundraiser for your local children's bereavement center.**

Seek out a support group/camp. Give yourself the time and space to process grief and share memories. Find support near you at childrengrieve.org/find-support.

Journal thoughts and feelings or create a memory shelf or memory box to keep mementos. Appropriate for any age.

Visit the location of their remains or other meaningful place.

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Suggested Resource List

The inclusion of any organization or resource in this Resource List does not imply or constitute an endorsement or recommendation, nor does exclusion imply disapproval.

National Alliance for Children's Grief

There are a variety of resources available for free and for purchase, but the following are especially beneficial resources for funeral homes and families.

- NACG Resource Library (nacg.org/resources)
- "Grief Talks: Talking to Children about Death & Dying"
- "Grief Talks: Talking to Children about End of Life Rituals"
- "When Someone Dies: A Family Activity Book"

Funeral Service Foundation (funeralservicefoundation.org)

- Youth and Funerals Booklet
- When a Child Dies Booklet

Books

- The Centering Corporation (centering.org) has a lengthy list of books that can be supportive for families and grief professionals alike. Specifically for funeral homes, the following list is a good place to start. Please keep in mind that some of these books will mention specific after death beliefs that may not be applicable to all families or be inclusive of all cultures.
- In Loving Memory by Lacie Brueckner & Katherine Pendergast - two versions; for burial and cremation
- Is Daddy Coming Back in a Minute? and What Happened to Daddy's Body By Elke and Alex Barber (3+)
- Lifetimes by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen (3+)
- The Next Place by Warren Hanson (5+)
- What Does That Mean? A Dictionary of Death, Dying and Grief terms for Grieving Children and Those Who Love Them by Harold Ivan Smith and Joy Johnson (8+)

Online Resources

- Kids and Funerals Article
- After a Death: An Activity Book for Children
- How to offer First Viewing Support for Kids, handout. A "how-to" for being present with a child who is viewing their deceased loved one for the first time.

For Kids with Autism

- NACG Supporting Children of All Abilities who are grieving Toolkit
- Eluna article about helping children with Autism with social stories
- Book: I have a Question about Death by Arlen Gaines and Meredith Polsky

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