

Guiding Adults in Talking to Children About Death and Attending Services

Beliefs and attitudes about death, funerals, and expressions of grief are strongly influenced by a family’s culture, religion, spirituality, and rituals related to mourning. Families need their own traditions, practices, and rituals so they can support each other, manage the wide range of emotional responses family members will have, face their adversities, find meaning for themselves, and honor the loved one. Navigating questions about death, funerals, and memorials can be challenging, but manageable. These sample questions and answers may help guide discussions.

What kinds of grief reactions will my children and I have?

There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Each member of your family will react differently. Some may not cry, while others might cry a lot.

There is no “normal” length of time for grieving. Family members and friends should try to understand that each person is going through his or her own course of grief. Everyone needs extra time to mourn.

The grief of young children can be just as strong as that of any other family member. Yet you may see them grieve just a short time and then start playing. Some cannot share their feelings in words, but show their grief through play. Parents can expect that their children’s behavior may be worse at times.

Are there differences in reactions among children who were at the mass violence event and those children in the wider community?

Children at the mass violence event may not show or speak of their grief. They may seem to be more focused on what they saw or heard that day than on how much they miss their friends. It is normal for children to tell (or act out) the same stories over and over or to repeatedly ask the same questions. School-aged children faced with the death of friends or loved ones, often feel guilty or ashamed in the mistaken belief that somehow they could have prevented the death. If children continue to focus on the event over the next few weeks, parents should call back for community resources to help their family.

How well do children understand the idea of death?

Children’s understanding of death depends on the age of the child, his or her prior experience with death, and the family’s religious beliefs and cultural values.

Pre-school children	May not understand that death is permanent. They may believe that if they wish it, the person could return. To help children understand the physical reality of a person’s death, parents can use concrete facts—that he or she is no longer breathing or moving, is not hungry or thirsty, is not scared or having feelings of discomfort or pain.
School-age children	May understand the physical reality of death, but still may have times that they imagine seeing the person again (but not tell anyone). They may still expect to see them again at school.

Parents of both pre-school and school-age children should say that while the person has died, we can still love them and keep them in our hearts and thoughts.

How do I talk to my child about death?

- Be truthful with your child
- Give short, simple, honest, and age-appropriate answers to their questions
- Listen carefully to their feelings without judgment (there are no “wrong” feelings)
- Be ready to discuss the same things or answer the same questions over again
- Do not be afraid to say that you don’t know the answer to a question
- Ask what he or she wants to know and give answers that fit those questions
- Let your child know that he or she can come to talk to you at anytime

What are some issues about having my child and family attend services?

Funerals help the family and community say goodbye. They can help children understand the physical reality of death: that the person who died cannot come back. Being at a funeral with grieving family and friends may help a child express his or her grief. While attending services can be distressing, it may be harder on children to be left out of something so important to the family.

Parents/caregivers should give children a choice to attend or not to attend the service. They may encourage, but not pressure them. Before asking the child to choose, describe what will occur.

- Tell children what they might see or hear if they attend, including the type of service, what will occur, and how people will behave (i.e., adults may be crying, a special area for the family may be set aside, there may be a viewing of the loved one—which they don’t have to see).
- Tell children about alternative arrangements to attending, for example, that they can stay with a neighbor or friend of the family.
- If they don’t attend, offer to say something or read something on their behalf, and explain that they can participate in memorial activities at a later time, including creating their own memorial.

If your children decide do attend a service, before you go, review what they can expect will happen.

- Talk to your children not only about what to expect, but also about how you may react. Assure them that this is your way of being sad today and that you are okay.
- Consider whether you will be able to accompany and support your child or whether you need to have another family member or friend there to support him or her.
- Prepare the companion to both comfort your child and take him or her out of the setting for breaks from the service as needed, so that you can fully attend to your own feelings.
- Before the event, review what your children can expect will happen and what they need to do.

Services are emotionally intense. Consider carefully how many you and your child should attend. When grieving multiple losses, there may be multiple services. If the community or school plans a memorial service to celebrate the lives of all of the children and adults who died, attending such a service may be a better alternative for both parents and children than attending multiple funerals.

If the family chooses not to attend services they can engage in a variety of alternative rituals:

- Light candles at home or in a public place to remember those who died.
- Create a ceremony consistent with their culture and tradition.
- Say prayers at home or in their places of worship.
- Write notes or make cards for the surviving family members.
- Share with each other feelings and memories of those who are gone.

How can I help my child after a funeral or memorial?

Talk to your children about their feelings and answer their questions. They may need some help in naming their feelings. They may ask you about your reactions and those of other people that were there. Reassure them that people showing intense emotions are OK, that they were showing how much they miss the person.

- Ask children whether they would like to talk with someone else about the service, such as a teacher or clergy member. Offer to join your child if he or she would like.
- After the funeral, be prepared to give more time and support to your children, such as extra time at bedtime. Again, be prepared for repeated questions about the event.

Take care of your child by taking care of yourself during this time. Parents should have someone they can talk to about their own feelings.

- Be aware that children may worry that something bad will happen to family members or friends and may have trouble separating from them. When separating, tell children where you are going and when you will return, so they know what to expect.

Is it OK to celebrate the holidays while my community is grieving?

Tell your child that the holiday may not feel as it usually does, but that's OK. Children benefit from having routines and structure. Celebrating the holidays is one of those routines. Think of a way to add an activity that honors those who are gone, for example, lighting a candle.

Above all, remember that talking with children who are grieving is emotionally challenging, so please practice good Self Care!