

A Child's Goodbye: Children and the Rite of Farewell



Working in hospice, we talk regularly with children who are anticipating or grieving the death of grandparents, and increasingly, great-grandparents. They share stories about the importance of these enriching relationships. Children miss the warmth, patience, and unhurried attention that older relatives so lovingly provide. Older people take time for children - a great gift in today's hurry-up society. In addition to the grandparents who have the luxury of spending special time with their grandkids, many grandparents today are co-parenting their grandchildren or providing for their day-to-day care while parents work. Children respond deeply to the depth and wisdom that folks one generation (or more) removed from them bring to their lives.

Many more children than we might expect experience the death of a parent. Social Security statistics indicate that, by age eighteen, almost one in twenty children has lost a parent – conservatively, that translates to one child in every classroom. Children lose siblings as well, and although the percentage whose brother or sister dies is relatively low, sibling loss is a life-changing passage for those children who experience it.

Increasingly, children are impacted by the loss of expected siblings – baby brothers and sisters who die before or at birth. Many years ago, pregnancy was barely mentioned to children (until the change in Mommy became glaringly obvious) and going to the hospital and coming home with a new baby was very mysterious. Now prospective big brothers and sisters listen to the baby's heartbeat, attend "Big Brother, Big Sister Classes", and visit the birthing center, all in preparation for welcoming the new little one. When something goes wrong with a pregnancy or at the time of birth, siblings may feel frightened, confused, and disappointed. If there will be a funeral or memorial service for the baby, there may be questions about brothers or sisters attending.

It may seem easier to leave children out of farewell rituals. Wakes and funerals are long and tiring. For adults in mourning, having to make all the arrangements, greet all the visitors, and find the time to say their own goodbye can be stressful. Realistically, can they also be expected to take care of the children - especially little ones? Do children belong at wakes, funerals, memorial services? Do they understand? Could they be traumatized by such a close encounter with the physical reality of death?

It is almost always true that when a person who is significant in the life of a child dies, a child needs to say goodbye, the first significant step in a healthy and manageable grief experience. The benefits of saying goodbye and being included in the farewell ritual are great and far outweigh our concerns. The following suggestions may be of help as you plan to include your children in this very important family event.

- If at all possible, let children see the person who has died. This can happen at home (if the person died there), at the hospital, at the funeral home (a private viewing by special arrangements with the funeral director), or at the wake/funeral.
 - Explain to children where they will see the person and how the person is different, i.e. he isn't breathing anymore, he can't hear you or talk to you anymore, she can't move now, etc.
 - While we often agonize over whether or not the person "looks like him/herself," most children tell us the person looked fine or okay.
 - If children have questions about changes in the person's appearance, answer them with enough information to be accurate. Too much information is not helpful.
- Use the correct language - "Grandpa has died" or "Grandma is dead": avoid euphemisms such as "has gone to sleep" or "We lost Nana."
- Let children view the person from the distance that is comfortable to them. Allow children to touch or talk to the person who has died, but do not prompt them or insist that they do.
- Children who are old enough may be included in funeral arrangements.
 - Even very young children can choose the kind of flowers they would like to give and may bring the flowers with them.
 - Older children can do readings or assist with music selections.
 - Many children write a letter, draw a picture, or choose a keepsake to put into the casket.
- Prepare children for what they will encounter at each step of the farewell ritual.
 - Explain what the funeral home, church, and/or cemetery look like.
 - Explain and name significant elements such as *casket*, *hearse*, or *grave*.
 - Include an explanation of how people may behave and help children to understand that the tears of the adults around them are okay and nothing to be afraid of.

When they're well-prepared and know what to expect, children will not be overwhelmed. Many kids are very positive about the wakes and funerals of the people they love, enjoying the chance to talk and hear stories about their loved one, visiting with and receiving support from friends and family, and feeling good to have been included in an event that is so important.

It may be helpful to designate a close friend, family member, or babysitter to accompany the children throughout the wake and funeral, a person who can see to it that children are fed, supervised, and attended to. He or she can make sure that children, particularly younger ones, get necessary breaks – going to a park, a restaurant, or home. Sometimes children must leave a wake early in order to get a good night's sleep or simply because the day becomes too long for them. The person acting as the child's advocate can answer his/her questions and be aware of the child's emotional state when parents are busy with the demands of the day. While interaction between parents and their children is an important part of the wake and funeral, the attention to the children that the advocate can provide assures parents that their children are not "lost", physically or emotionally.

After all the careful explanations, arrangements, and planning, a child may decide himself not to attend a wake or funeral. In this case, the best way to proceed is to ask if there is something particular that is frightening or worrisome to him. If there is, try to allay the child's fears or concerns. Next, make sure the child understands that this is the last opportunity to see or say goodbye to the important person. Offer alternatives – attending part of the events, having a limited time during which the child will attend the wake or funeral, viewing the person's body or not, etc.

Don't argue or insist that the child attend or express disappointment if she decides not to participate. Ask if there is anything she would like to do instead of attending: sending a note or drawing a picture that a family member will place in the casket, choosing flowers for the person, lighting candle at home, visiting the cemetery at a later date, taking a plant to church or planting one in the yard in memory of the important person.

Grief often looks very different in children than it does in adults. While some children may be tearful and sad, many more tend to play and socialize their way through the farewell ritual. Many children have called the wake, "That big party we had for Grandpa." Children really connect with the gathering aspect of these events and they lead the way when it comes to celebrating a life. They often recount the wonderful things said about the person who has died and talk about all the people who came to the funeral.

Children will remember having been part of the important goodbye and are affirmed by participating in it. With thoughtful preparation, we can safely and meaningfully include children in our farewell rituals – one of the most precious opportunities we have to share with them what it means to be family.