

Explaining about cremation.

The death of someone close may be a child's first experience with the concepts of mortality, death and dying. For others, the death may come at a time when they already understand those concepts, but may not know much about what happens after. In either case, keep a child's developmental stage in mind when discussing difficult topics such as death and cremation.

Explaining to a child what happens to a body after a death can be challenging, but a child's natural curiosity means that this is something that you may encounter at some point. By following the child's lead and providing the information they are most interested to know in an age appropriate way, is the best starting point to ensure that the child understands cremation rather than 'information overload'.



Younger children below school age may not really understand death, so it is important to ensure that they understand that the person who died will not be in any pain during the cremation process. A short explanation about death should be part of the discussion.

How you explain what death is will depend on your personal and family beliefs. You may explain that death is when the person's spirit or soul leaves the body, and ensure the child understands that there is a difference between the body that we can see, and the spirit, which we cannot. When the spirit has gone, the body can no longer experience pain or any other feelings. One analogy used is that the body is now like the cocoon of a butterfly, when the butterfly has flown away. We might still be able to see the cocoon, but the butterfly itself isn't there anymore.

Children may ask why we have a funeral. You can explain that a funeral gives everyone who loved and cared for the person who has died, a chance to come together to share their sadness, and to remember all the good things about them.



Once the child understands about death, explaining cremation will be easier. Some tips to ensure the child understands the process and does not become afraid, include:

- Keep your explanations as simple facts and remain calm when discussing death and cremation.
- Avoid using words that may cause alarm. Instead, you may say that the body will be put in a very warm room until it turns into ashes, and explain that this is a very peaceful process.
- If your family has religious beliefs, these can be helpful in explaining what happens to the spirit after death, and where it goes after leaving the body.
- Many children may be unsure if their feelings or questions are normal. They need reassurance at this time, tell them that it is okay to have questions, and that strong feelings of sadness or loss are normal and shared by others. Reassure them that you are there if they need extra support, hugs, or answers to questions.

You can explain that afterwards the ashes can be buried or scattered at the crematorium or churchyard or another special place, so that you can visit and remember the person who has died.



As children get older, and their understanding increases, they will be ready for more detail. It is still important not to alarm them and choosing your words carefully is important. But details about cremation will be less frightening, and they may be more curious about the reasons why a person might choose cremation over burial, such as impact on the earth. If you know the reasons why the person chose cremation, particularly if they are related to the person's beliefs or values, it may be appropriate to share this with an older child. Again, asking the child questions and following their lead by answering them is helpful.

Always be as honest as possible. Learning and understanding about death is an important developmental phase for children. Keeping your answers honest and brief and allowing time for the child's own questions and feelings will help them understand what has happened to the person who died.

Children attending funerals

You may be undecided about whether your child should attend a funeral. The answer will depend on the child. Often, our first reaction is to try to spare them an upsetting experience, but going to the funeral may help them to come to terms with the death.



We do not advise you to insist a child goes if they do not want to, but if they want to go then it is usually best to let them. As long as they are prepared it is a helpful experience. Not being allowed to go may raise all kinds of worries in their mind about what is happening and why they are being kept away, and they may come to resent not being included, even if this decision was made with the best intentions.

If you take a child to the funeral, it is important to prepare them beforehand by telling them exactly what to expect. Try to involve the child in the funeral if they want to. Depending on how close they were to the person who died, they may like to read something they have written, or a poem, or they may just want to have some part in the preparation and planning. Someone close to the child should stay with them throughout the service to support and comfort them when it is needed, this is especially important if you are unlikely to be able to support them yourself due to your own grief, and any other role and responsibility that you may have on the day of the funeral.

If you would like to discuss your individual circumstances, please get in touch.