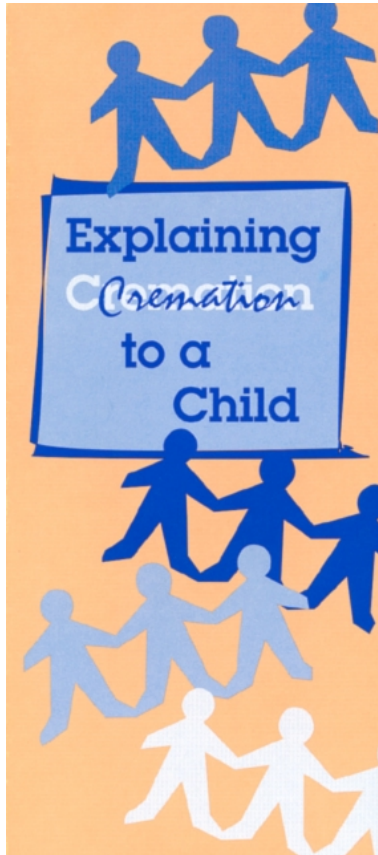


Explaining Cremation to a Child

Children and Death

The death of a family member or friend not only affects adults, but also can have a profound impact on children. Children experience grief just as adults do. Child experts say that even before children are able to talk, they grieve when someone loved dies. And these feelings about the death become a part of their lives forever.



It is important to remember that children deal with death differently at different ages and that their reactions are not always obvious or immediate. A child at two or three years of age has little understanding of the meaning of death while one who is eight or nine has a capacity to grasp life's mysteries and will remember the experience vividly. The level of a child's emotional development should be taken into consideration by the adult before talking to the child about death or death-related topics.

Adults who are willing to talk openly about the death of a loved one help a child understand that grief is a natural feeling when someone has died. A child needs adults to confirm that it's all right to be sad and to cry; that the hurt they feel now won't last forever.

Answering a Child's Questions

Caring parents can help a child during a time of loss by being open, honest and loving and by responding to his or her questions in a way that shows they care.

When answering a child's questions, adults should keep in mind the following:

- Tell a child only what he or she is capable of understanding. There is no need to be evasive, but modify explanations to what the child can comprehend. A too complicated reply often confuses a child.
- Use language that the child can understand.
- What is said is important, but the manner in which it is said has even greater significance. Be aware of voice tone. Try to answer the questions in a matter-of-fact way without too much emotion.
- Remember that what is communicated without words can be just as meaningful to a child as what is actually said.

It is not unusual for a child to ask the same question again and again. Repeating questions and getting answers help the child understand and adjust to the loss of someone loved.

Explaining Cremation

When a deceased family member or friend is to be cremated or already has been cremated, your child may want to know what cremation is. In answering your child's questions about cremation, keep in mind the guidelines that have already been outlined in this leaflet. Keep your explanation of what cremation involves simple and easy-to-understand.

In explaining cremation to your child, avoid words that may have a frightening connotation such as “fire” and “burn”. Instead, in a straight-forward manner, tell your child that the deceased body, enclosed in a casket or container, is taken to a place call a crematory where it goes through a special process that reduces it to small particles resembling fine gray or white sand. Be sure to point out that a dead body feels no pain.

Let your child know that these cremated remains are placed in a container called an urn and returned to the family. If cremation has already taken place and the container picked up, you may want to show it to the child. Because children are curious, your child may want to look at the contents. If your child makes such a request, look at them yourself first so that you can describe what they look like. Share this with your child. Then let the child decide whether to proceed further.

If possible, arrange for a time when you and your child can be with the body before the cremation is carried out. If handled correctly, this time can be a positive experience for the child. It can provide an opportunity for the child to say “goodbye” and accept the reality of death. However, the viewing of the body should not be forced. Use your best judgment on whether or not this should be done.

Depending on the age of your child, you may wish to include him or her in the planning of what will be done with the cremated remains. Before you do this, familiarize yourself with the many types of cremation memorials available. Some of the many options to consider include burying the remains in a family burial plot, interring them in an urn garden that many cemeteries have, or placing the urn in a columbarium niche. Defined as a recessed compartment, the niche may be an open front protected by glass or a closed front faced with bronze, marble, or granite. (An arrangement of niches is called a columbarium, which may be an entire building, a room, a bank along a corridor or a series of special indoor alcoves. It also may be part of an outdoor setting such as a garden wall.) Although your child may not completely understand these or other options for memorialization, being involved in the planning helps establish a sense of comfort and understanding that life goes on even though someone loved has died.

If you incur any difficulties in explaining death or cremation to your child, you may wish to consult a child guidance counselor who specializes in these areas.

When a child asks questions about cremation, adults should be prepared to answer.