

Should My Child Go to the Funeral?

Research, preparation, and alternatives

What Research Says About Children and Funerals

The question of whether children should attend funerals is one of the most common concerns parents bring to counselors and pediatricians. The answer, according to decades of research, is nuanced but clear: **the child's own choice should be the primary factor.**

A foundational study by Furman (1978, PubMed 932883) examined children and funeral attendance and found that while young children under age six or seven may not always benefit from attendance, the critical variable was not age but parental support. Children who felt secure in attending—regardless of age—generally tolerated the experience well. Conversely, children who refused to attend were often accurately perceiving their parents' inability to provide adequate emotional support during the service.

A study published through Taylor & Francis found that among children who attended a parent's funeral, none reported negative experiences, and two-thirds reported it as a positive or helpful event. Children who were excluded were more likely to experience regret later in life.

The Child Mind Institute affirms that there is no universal right or wrong answer. Funerals are an important part of the grieving process—they provide a way to symbolically say goodbye and begin accepting that a loved one is gone. However, no child should ever be forced to attend.

What the Evidence Tells Us

- The child's desire to attend (or not) is the most reliable indicator of readiness
- Children who attend with adequate support generally report positive experiences
- Exclusion can lead to feelings of confusion, abandonment, and lasting regret
- No research has identified a specific 'post-funeral syndrome' in children
- Preparation is the single most important factor in a positive experience

The Child's Choice Should Be the Determining Factor

The Child Mind Institute and multiple research studies agree: the decision should ultimately rest with the child, informed by honest preparation from adults. A 4-year-old may not fully understand the permanence of death, but if they want to be there, that instinct should be respected.

Questions to help a child decide:

- "Would you like to go to the funeral to say goodbye to [name]? It's okay if you want to, and it's okay if you don't."
- "What are you most worried about?" (This reveals fears you can address.)

- "Do you have any questions about what it will be like?"
- "If you decide to go and then want to leave, that's completely fine. [Trusted adult] will take you out whenever you want."

If a child says no, respect their decision. Explore their reasons gently—sometimes a 'no' is based on a misunderstanding that can be corrected (e.g., fear that they'll see something scary), and sometimes it reflects a genuine and healthy boundary. Either way, the child's voice matters.

How to Prepare a Child: Step by Step

The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) and the Child Mind Institute both emphasize that preparation is the single most important thing a parent can do. Walk through every aspect of the experience in advance.

Step 1: Explain What a Funeral Is

Use simple, honest language. 'A funeral is a special time when people come together to remember [name] and say goodbye. People will be sad, and some people will cry. That's normal.' Explain whether it has religious elements and what those involve.

Step 2: Describe the Physical Setting

Tell them where it will be (church, funeral home, outdoors). Describe the room. If there will be a casket, explain what it looks like. 'There will be a special box called a casket. [Name] will be inside it, lying down with their eyes closed. They might look like they're sleeping, but they're not—their body has stopped working.'

Step 3: Prepare for an Open Casket (if applicable)

The Child Mind Institute advises being very specific: 'If you touch them, they will feel cold and firm. That's normal—it's just what happens to a body after someone dies. You don't have to touch them or go close to the casket if you don't want to.'

Step 4: Discuss Other People's Emotions

'You will see adults crying, and that might be surprising or scary. But even though people are very sad, they are going to be okay. Crying is a healthy way to let sadness out. If you see me crying, I'm still okay and I'm still here for you.'

Step 5: Assign a 'Funeral Buddy'

Designate a trusted adult whose sole job is to be with the child. This person should be someone the child knows well and feels safe with—and someone willing to leave the service at any point without hesitation. Pack a quiet activity bag (crayons, a book) in case the child needs a break.

Step 6: Give an Exit Plan

'If at any point you want to leave, just tell [buddy's name] and you can go right away. You won't be in trouble. You can go outside, draw pictures, or just sit somewhere quiet. You can also come back in if you want to.'

Alternative Rituals for Very Young Children

For children who choose not to attend—or for very young children for whom a long service would be overwhelming—alternative rituals can provide their own form of closure. The Child Mind Institute notes that 'there are other ways to have a goodbye.'

- **Plant something together:** A tree, a flower, or a small garden in memory of the person. This creates a living memorial the child can tend and visit.
- **Release flowers in water:** At a stream, river, or the ocean, let the child place flowers on the water and watch them float away.
- **Light a candle:** A simple candlelighting ceremony at home where each person shares a memory or says something they loved about the person.
- **Draw a picture or write a letter:** Let the child create something for the person who died. They can keep it, bury it, or place it at the grave later.
- **Create a memory box:** Gather photos, small objects, and written memories into a decorated box the child can keep.
- **Share stories:** Gather family members to share favorite memories. Let the child participate at their level—listening counts.
- **Visit the grave or memorial site later:** Some children aren't ready on the day of the funeral but want to visit later. That's valid.

After the Funeral: What Grief Looks Like in Children

Whether a child attended the funeral or not, grief doesn't end when the service does. In fact, for many children, the hardest period begins after the funeral, when the community attention fades and daily life resumes without the person who died.

The Child Mind Institute notes that children grieve differently from adults. They may alternate rapidly between crying and playing. They may seem fine for days and then suddenly become distraught. This is normal and does not mean they don't care or aren't processing the loss.

Common Post-Funeral Grief Behaviors by Age

Age Group	What You May See
Preschool (3–5)	Regression, separation anxiety, asking repeatedly where the person went, re-enacting death through play, sleep disruptions
School Age (6–9)	Physical complaints (headaches, stomachaches), difficulty concentrating at school, worry that other loved ones will die, questions about their own mortality
Preteens (10–12)	Anger, emotional volatility, withdrawal from activities, guilt ('I should have been nicer'), increased need for peer connection
Teens (13–18)	May appear stoic or dismissive on the surface while struggling internally, risk-taking behavior, changes in friend groups, academic shifts, existential questioning

What to Watch For

Most children will move through grief with the support of caring adults. However, if you notice any of the following persisting beyond several weeks, consider seeking guidance from a child psychologist or grief counselor:

- Persistent inability to enjoy anything or engage in normal activities
- Expressed desire to die or 'be with' the person who died
- Significant, ongoing changes in eating, sleeping, or behavior at school
- Intense guilt or self-blame that doesn't respond to reassurance
- Complete withdrawal from family, friends, and activities

Helping After the Funeral

- Keep talking about the person who died—using their name normalizes grief
- Maintain routines as much as possible: school, bedtime, meals
- Check in regularly, but don't force conversations
- Mark anniversaries and holidays: 'I know we're all thinking about Grandpa today'
- Let them see you grieve—modeling healthy grief gives them permission to do the same

Sources:

1. Child Mind Institute, Should Children Attend Funerals?: <https://childmind.org/article/should-children-attend-funerals/>
2. Child Mind Institute, Helping Children Cope With Grief: <https://childmind.org/guide/helping-children-cope-with-grief/>
3. Furman E., How Do Children and Funerals Mix? (PubMed 932883): <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/932883/>

4. Taylor & Francis, Should Children Attend Their Parent's Funerals?: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.0264-3944.2004.00281.x>
5. Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, Explaining Funeral Services to a Child: <https://www.chop.edu/health-resources/explaining-funeral-services-and-burial-preparation-child>
6. Child Mind Institute, Helping Children Deal With Grief: <https://childmind.org/article/helping-children-deal-grief/>