

CORONAVIRUS:

HOW TO SAY GOODBYE WHEN A FUNERAL ISN'T POSSIBLE

The restrictions and safety measures introduced in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic will affect practices around funerals and funeral homes in the coming months. Winston's Wish, a national childhood bereavement charity, knows how difficult this will be for children and young people and has put together the below briefing to offer support and guidance for talking to children about funerals in this period.

SHOULD CHILDREN ATTEND FUNERALS?

Winston's Wish recognises that your children are your children; you know their individual needs, worries, strengths. Its guidance and suggestions are always offered in that context, and based on what it has learnt from listening to, and supporting, thousands of children and young people across the years.

The charity has spoken to children who chose to attend the funeral of someone important and were glad they did. It has spoken to children who chose not to attend and had no regrets. It has never spoken to a child who attended a funeral and wished they hadn't... but has spoken to so very many who did not attend and deeply regret it.

Children may also want to see the body of the person who died: to say a final goodbye, to begin to understand the reality of death, to express their love one last time.

HOW HAS CORONAVIRUS AFFECTED FUNERALS?

The national response to the coronavirus outbreak means that children and young people who have a loved one die in this period probably won't have the chance to make the choices they normally could.

Advice around funerals is constantly changing, you can find the latest advice at <https://nafdcovid19.org.uk/>

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Giving hope to grieving children

At the least, we understand that the number of people attending a funeral will be kept to the absolute minimum and that distancing rules will be enforced. At the moment, members of the same household who have been socially isolated together are likely to be able to attend a funeral. Different rules affect viewing the body of the person who died at a funeral home. It is likely that these arrangements will become more restricted in coming weeks.

The most important thing that parents and carers can do is to reduce the impact these enforced changes have on children's experiences. A good start is to acknowledge that things will need to be different but will still be full of meaning and depth. For example: "Because of this outbreak of the virus, lots of things are having to change. As you know, schools are mainly closed and I'm now working from home. One of the things that has changed is how we can hold a funeral."

WHAT ABOUT MEMORIAL SERVICES?

Some people are already planning to hold memorial services at a later date for people who die during this period. A memorial service can be planned slowly, with input from children and young people, and can provide a helpful opportunity to remember and celebrate the person who lived (as well as mourn the person who died). This also gives people time to jot down a few memories and stories on postcards or Post-It notes or share electronically and to find some old photographs to bring to share with children - either then or at a later time.

CAN I ATTEND THE FUNERAL OF SOMEONE WHO DIED BECAUSE OF CORONAVIRUS?

If the person died due to coronavirus, it is likely that all procedures around the funeral home and the funeral itself will be tightly restricted and there will be no choices around children's participation and the whole procedure may seem rather impersonal and clinical.

WHAT IF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE CAN'T SEE THE BODY?

If the family and the child wanted to see the body of the person who died, but this is not possible because of the new rules in response to coronavirus, there are some alternatives that can help. For example, if one person can attend, they can explain in detail to the children what the person looks like and where their body is being looked after. If no-one is allowed to attend, a funeral director can describe the surroundings to an adult to then share with children. "Granny's body was lying very peacefully on a table. The room was painted pale green and there was a vase of flowers beside her. Her skin felt cold but otherwise she looked just like Granny did when she was alive."

A child or young person may want to send in a card to be laid beside the person, or an object of significance, for example, a toy, a flower or a drawing. Funeral directors can also personalise the closed casket with, for example, a photograph of the deceased.

WHAT IF CHILDREN CANNOT ATTEND THE FUNERAL?

If the child or young person is not able to attend the funeral, there are several ways to still make the experience special and deeply meaningful. For example, "Because of all the changes being made to keep people safe and prevent this virus spreading too far, we won't all be able to go to Grandpa's funeral. However, we've had a think and have some ideas on how you can still be part of it..."

1. If only a couple of people from the same household can attend the funeral in person, children and young people can follow the same order of service from home. This could be at the same time, or later when the relative who attended the funeral can share what happened as the family follows the service together.

2. Some places of worship and crematoria are live streaming funerals so people can watch online from home.
3. It may be that family members cannot be in the same location but want to be together for the funeral so you could video call each other.
4. Photographs can be taken to show children and young people to help them understand what happens at a funeral. Photographs that are helpful include the outside of the place where the funeral is being held, the hearse, the coffin (or equivalent), any flowers or decoration and the interior of the place (with permission).
5. Keepsakes from the funeral service can be very meaningful for children. For example, some flowers from the tributes to press and keep, a leaf from one of the trees in the grounds, a pebble from the surrounding area and the order of service.
6. Children can participate by contributing to some of the choices within the ceremony. For example, they could choose a piece of music, select a poem or suggest flowers.
7. Children could write and/or draw cards to be placed on or in the coffin, or choose a toy or something meaningful to be placed with the person's body.
8. They could also write a tribute to the person who died which can be read by the person taking the service or by whoever is able to attend.



“YOUNG PEOPLE MAY FEEL THEY ARE LETTING DOWN A RELATIVE OR FRIEND IF THEY ARE NOT PRESENT AT THE FUNERAL.”



Funeral arrangers and celebrants will do all they can to continue to make funerals as personal as possible; they might be able, for example, to dress in bright colours, wear a football shirt, have a special flower in their buttonhole. Coffins may still be able to be personalised.

“I know you wanted to say something about Dad. I wonder if we could write down together what you would want to say and then I or Uncle Harry will read it for you as part of the service”.

HOW CAN FRIENDS AND FAMILY HELP A BEREAVED CHILD OR YOUNG PERSON?

The wider family and friends may be feeling especially helpless to support the bereaved family from a distance. As well as sending thoughts and keeping in touch, sharing memories of the person who died is a practical and important way to help. These can be shared at the time of the funeral and also kept as a store of memories for the children to explore over time.

Here's a starter that could, for example, be emailed or sent to friends and family on social media:-

To all the family and friends of _____ (first name of the person who has died)

I knew them _____ (for example 'when we worked at the shop'; 'from the pub')

I will always remember _____ (some general observation, e.g. 'their generosity'; 'their terrible jokes')

In particular, I remember _____ (some specific memory/memories, e.g. 'the day we missed the bus and had to walk home'; 'her teaching me to swim')

They were good at _____ (something either physical: 'crazy golf' or, if possible, some special quality: 'making people happy')

Always know that _____

Thinking of you at this time.

_____ (Name – and contact information if possible)

WHAT ABOUT OBSERVING FAITH AND CULTURAL PRACTICES DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC?

It will be particularly difficult for children and young people whose culture or faith requires certain practices to be performed in particular ways for the person who has died. Churches, mosques, synagogues and other places of worship are closed to the public although faith leaders can still conduct services in places such as a crematorium or graveside. Children and young people may believe that their loved one has not been treated appropriately and may need reassurance, using the language of faith, that everything that is being done is respectful and necessary.

HOW MIGHT CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE REACT?

Alongside all of the tumbling, sharp feelings of grief a child or young person will be feeling because someone important has died, will be added feelings of confusion and frustration because, at the present time, there can't be a traditional funeral. Young people may feel they are letting down a relative or friend if they are not present at the funeral. Younger children may find it even harder to understand what has happened without the chance of observing the funeral.

HOW CAN YOU SUPPORT A BEREAVED CHILD OR YOUNG PERSON AT THIS TIME?

Keep talking and keep listening to what children are saying about not being able to attend the funeral.

Acknowledge that this is a strange and difficult time as, even without the restrictions caused by the virus, children will be relieved to have their concerns noticed.

Keep children informed (where possible and within their understanding) about what will happen to their relative's body and how the funeral will take place.

Reassure children. This is a worrying time for children anyway, and the combination of bereavement and concern about the effects of the virus may make them particularly anxious about 'not doing things right'. Reassure them that their relative knew they were loved and cared for... and not attending the funeral is the right thing to do at this time.

Reach out for support. There are many resources on the Winston's Wish website to help parents and carers support grieving children. The Winston's Wish Helpline – on 08088 020 021 - is continuing to operate during this period and can offer guidance, support and information. To protect Winston's Wish staff, the Helpline is currently operating a remote service, so callers should leave a message on the answering machine and one of Winston's Wish's experienced practitioners will call back.

Look after yourself. Super-parents or super-carers don't really exist. Simply doing the best you can at this time is all that your children need. Take time to look after yourself too.

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