

Funeral Options When You Have Lost a Child

The death of a child is one of the most traumatic and sad events a parent can experience. If you or a loved one has recently lost a child, the following information and tips can help make the burial process go more smoothly.

Planning the Funeral

If at all possible, both parents should be involved in planning the funeral and memorial services. Parents who were overlooked in the planning process often say they felt uncomfortable with the choices others made for their children's services. Well-meaning relatives and friends may try to assume the burden to save the parents from the pain. However, while the process will certainly be difficult, it is also a critical step in the healing process.

Selecting a Funeral Home

A grieving parent should base the selection of a funeral home on several factors:

- **Sensitivity:** Make some phone calls and speak with the funeral director. Be sure to tell him or her that you have just experienced the death of a child. His or her attitude should be sensitive and gentle. If you feel a sense of over-professionalism or that he or she seems to be austere, hang up and try another funeral home. Assuring that the director will be sensitive to your needs as a bereaved parent is the most important factor of choice.
- **Options:** If you are comfortable with the director's level of awareness and sensitivity, arrange to make a visit. Upon arrival, consider the options available to you. Remember important issues such as location, flexibility of service options, coordination options with clergy and the cemetery you have chosen, and payment arrangements. Be sure to make your memorial desires clear to the director so he or she is able to coordinate the schedule and other arrangements according to your wishes.
- **Flexibility:** If it is too difficult for you to deal directly with the funeral director, find a family member or support-group volunteer with whom you can speak; ask this person to communicate and coordinate your requests for the memorial service on your behalf.

Types of Funerals

There are two types of funerals: one is with your child's body present so that the limited number of family members and friends who can attend may have the opportunity to say goodbye; the other is without your child's body present.

You may choose an open or closed casket viewing. If you choose to have your child's body present, consider decorating the casket with pictures of his or her family, stuffed animals or toys, flowers and other items of memorial. A common myth surrounding a burial is that all bodies must be embalmed. However, this is your decision. Make sure to express your questions and concerns to your director.

Cremation

If you are considering cremation, think about what you would like to do with your child's ashes before acting on your final decision. Most bereaved parents who cremate are very comfortable with their decision. If you do choose cremation, you may keep the ashes in an urn at your home, bury the ashes with a memorial headstone or scatter the ashes at a special location. If you choose to scatter the ashes, it is strongly recommended that you save a small portion of the ashes to keep. Special boxes, charm necklaces and miniature urns are available in



which to keep a small portion of the ashes. If you decide to cremate, you still should have a memorial service for family and friends; it is a crucial component in the bereavement process.

If you are feeling pressured into cremation due to a lack of funds, lack of time or sheer confusion surrounding the decision-making process, ask someone to assist you in that decision so you do not have regrets.

Some parents may feel cheated if they do not have a special place to go and care for their child's body. An occasional visit to the cemetery where your child is buried or the ashes are placed can have a special healing effect. It is a place to go on your child's birthday or on a holiday to remember your child or even just a serene place to go and gather your thoughts.

The Memorial Service

If possible, it is important to have a memorial service whether you have made the decision to bury or cremate. You may choose to have it at the funeral home, the cemetery, your place of worship or even at your home. If you have made the decision to scatter your child's ashes in a special location, you may have a memorial service, called a committal service, at that special location.

Include siblings in the memorial service. Offer them an opportunity to speak, read a letter or read a poem to their brother or sister. Encourage siblings to draw pictures or write letters, and allow them to place these in the casket with their sibling. Also, letting them choose a special toy or memorial item from home is helpful. Older siblings may want to help carry the casket at the cemetery. By including siblings in the service, it will grant them the realization of the death of their sibling while giving them special memories they will carry their lifetime.

Planning a Memorial Service

Your clergy person, a staff member of the funeral home or even a friend or family member can direct the memorial service. Consider having someone videotape the service or take photographs. It may be painful to look at them immediately following the death of your child, but you may someday want to have the photos or tape available to you. Consider songs that you would like to have played or poetry read in memory of your child. If you are religious, you may want to have your child baptized if you had not done so prior.

Special Remembrances

Some personal ways of remembering your child may be:

- Choosing a special song to eulogize your child. Listen to the words several times, and make sure they have meaning to you. Print the words to the song on special paper, and hand them out to friends and family at the memorial service.
- Bring a special stuffed animal; toys; cards and letters from siblings; or a special necklace for your child to be buried with. Choose a favorite outfit (perhaps the siblings could assist in choosing the outfit) and a special blanket. If your child was hospitalized, be sure the funeral home has removed your child's identification bracelet prior to burial for you to keep.
- If you elect to have a spiritual leader or pastor speak at the memorial service, it is a good idea to limit the sermon to 15 minutes maximum. You have permission to ask about the format or outline.
- If at all possible, both of the child's parents should try to write a letter to the child. The letter should be read by a close friend or



- family member on behalf of the parents. The letter should be about the feelings of grief, loss and love for the child. Also, consider choosing a special poem or two as a eulogy.
- Keep in mind that open-casket services can help to make an infant or child more “real” to others.
- Ask others to send stuffed animals or toys instead of flowers. After the services, you can donate these to a local charity on behalf of your child.
- Make a tape of your own favorite songs so you are not limited to the choice of the funeral home.
- The parents should strongly consider closing the casket for the final time. In some instances, the parents can ride to the cemetery in the hearse. The family also can request to shovel the first dirt: this is a therapeutic ritual for many. Guests also may take a handful of dirt and sprinkle it onto the grave. Remember that you may stay with your child until the cemetery staff have completely buried your child.
- A balloon release is a warm tribute to the significance of the child’s life. Consider this ritual at the very end of the ceremony.
- If possible, a ceremony at sundown is beautiful, as is a graveside unity candlelight service: one larger candle is lit, and each person lights his or her candle off the main unity candle in honor of the child.

Resources

- National Funeral Directors Association: www.nfda.org
- National Cremation Society: www.nationalcremation.com
- Funeral Consumers Alliance: www.funerals.org
- Kavod v’Nichum: www.jewish-funerals.org
- Funeral Home Directory: www.funeralnet.com
- Federal Trade Commission: www.ftc.gov/funerals

