CHILDREN AND **FUNERALS**

Candle Child Bereavement Service

ST CHRISTOPHER'S

Parents and carers want to do the best for their children, and it is very hard to know what is best for them when a death has happened. You are trying to come to terms with what has happened, cope with painful and difficult feelings, and there are so many decisions and choices to be made

This leaflet has been written to help you think about your children and the funeral, why they should have the chance to go, and how to answer some of their questions.

WHY SHOULD CHILDREN GO TO FUNERALS?

A funeral is a family occasion, and your children are part of the family. If they are not given the choice to go or not, they may feel that they have been left out, and therefore are not important members of the family.

They will not be able to take part in saying goodbye to the person who has died, which can make it harder to accept that it has really happened and to start grieving.

They will not be able to understand that a funeral is about someone's life as well as their death, and to share in the good as well as the sad memories, with other relatives and friends. There is only one chance to go to a funeral.

EXPLAINING A FUNERAL

Many children will never have been to a funeral before, and will need you to explain it to them if they are to make a choice about whether they want to go or not. Children take in as much information as they can cope with at one time, so keep your explanation quite short to start with.

If you are stuck for words, you could say something like: 'A funeral is a special time when all the people who knew the person come together to remember them and to say goodbye. There will be special readings and music, and people will think about the person's life and how they will remember them. Some people will be very sad and may cry a lot, and other people will be thinking about the good memories they have.'

Your children may come back later with more questions, and may need some time to decide whether they wish to attend the funeral.

HOW OLD SHOULD CHILDREN BE BEFORE THEY GO TO A FUNERAL?

Research and experience has shown that children can understand about death sooner than we might think. Most children have a full understanding by the time they are about 8 years old, and many younger children will understand enough to go to the funeral.

Children who are old enough to go to school have learned to be able to sit and concentrate for short periods and will know that this is a special occasion, even if there are still some things they do not fully understand.

Younger children may find it helpful if they can take their favourite toy and are told that someone will be there who will go outside with them if they find it too difficult. This person does not have to be you; ask someone who knows the child well and who will not be as involved in the service as you will be.

If you explain the things that are likely to be new to them they will be able to manage this big event, just as they managed going to nursery or to school.

HOW CAN I HELP THEM TO FEEL PART OF IT?

What children can do will depend on their age and ability. They could help choose the readings, songs or music. They could choose the flowers and write on the card. They could give out the order of service sheets. Older children and teenagers may want to read something they or someone else has written.

Remember that you can decide how things should be, and talk it through with the person who is going to take the funeral.

It will help if there are going to be other children at the funeral, so ask other people to bring their children as well.

WHAT IF THEY DON'T WANT TO GO?

Children should not be forced to go if they have understood and chosen not to. If you feel that they are not comfortable with going, offer them an alternative that will feel right for you all, perhaps going to a close friend's house.

If they choose to go to school, let the teachers know that this is a special day for them so that support will be there if they need it.

You may want to think about ways you can do things together later to mark the occasion for them, for example visiting the crematorium or cemetery together and making your own private special time.

WHAT IF I DECIDE THAT I REALLY DON'T WANT THEM TO BE THERE?

If this is how you feel, you should not feel bad about it – this is not unusual. Children can understand your explanation that grown ups find things difficult too, and that funerals are very sad and painful times for everybody.

Tell the children who will talk to them about what the funeral was like and make sure that this happens as soon as possible so they do not feel left out.

Consider sharing with them any things which support this such as, for example, condolence cards or photographs taken at the funeral.

If you think about ways to make a special time together when you feel able to, they can share this with you. Rituals are important for children, and they will appreciate you doing this.

HOW DO I EXPLAIN ABOUT BURIAL OR CREMATION?

Children want to find out about the world, and will appreciate your explanation. They will also accept if you say that it is hard for you to talk about things because they make you feel sad.

One option is to start with: **"When someone dies their body is no use to them anymore, and we have to decide what to do with it. In this country, we put the body in a special box called a coffin, and we either bury it in the ground or we take it to a place where it goes into a very hot oven and is burnt. What made them special to us isn't there anymore, so we say goodbye to their body at the funeral service."**

For younger children, it will be important to remind them that the body cannot feel anything anymore.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Children, like adults, will go through a process of grief. At times they may feel very sad, at other times they may feel angry and sometimes they may seem to have forgotten about it. They will not have forgotten, and will want to talk and share memories and feelings and will look to you to tell and show them that it is all right to feel and to show feelings. Changes in your child's behaviour is a communication, and is often how children will show how they are feeling.

Grief can be a very lonely experience, and there are services around that can offer you some help or advice for yourself and your children (see next page).

WHAT DOES CANDLE OFFER?

- One-to-one and group counselling for any child or young person under the age of 18 in Bromley, Croydon, Lambeth, Lewisham or Southwark experiencing loss through death
- Groups to support parents, carers and trusted adults who are helping bereaved children and young people
- Specialist training, advice and consultancy services to schools and other organisations working with children facing bereavement
- An advice service for parents, carers and professionals.

stchristophers.org.uk/candle

OTHER PLACES TO GET HELP

CHILDHOOD BEREAVEMENT NETWORK

Lots of information and a directory of services providing support for bereaved children.

childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk

WINSTON'S WISH

Practical support and guidance for families, professionals and anyone concerned about a grieving child.

Telephone 08088 020 021
winstonswish.org.uk

CRUSE

Cruse provides a telephone helpline and face-to-face support from trained volunteers.

Telephone 0808808 1677
cruse.org.uk

HOPE AGAIN

The youth website of Cruse Bereavement Support. It is a safe place where young people can learn from each other how to cope with grief and feel less alone.

hopeagain.org.uk

FOR YOUR NOTES

If you would like this information in a different format, such as audio tape, braille or large print, or in another language, please speak to the Communications team on **020 8768 4500** or email **communications@stchristophers.org.uk**.

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