

Helping Children Understand Cremation

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

The Adult as Role Model and Helper

A child you care about is grieving the loss of someone loved. If you, too, loved the person who died, you are now faced with the difficult but critical task of helping both yourself and the child heal. Throughout the coming months you will be both a role model and a helper to the bereaved child in your care.

One of the first opportunities for you and the child to express your grief is the funeral. But sometimes the funeral can seem strange or confusing to children if they are not gently guided through the experience. Many aspects of the funeral must be explained at this unique child's developmentally-appropriate level.

If the body is to be cremated (which is happening more and more today), you may want to explain what cremation is to the child in your care. This article will help you be both compassionate and direct as you talk about cremation.

Children Are Naturally Curious

Children are naturally curious about everything, including death. But death is a taboo subject in many families. A parent or family member who would gladly help a child with his science homework may be uncomfortable answering the same child's questions about death, funerals and cremation.

You can help by being someone the child can turn to with his questions. Encourage him to ask you anything he wants to about the death and the funeral. Give him honest answers in words he will understand.

Follow the Lead of Each Unique Child

If there is one rule of thumb to keep in mind as you guide this child through the funeral experience, it is this: Follow the child's lead. If you listen to her and pay attention to her behaviors, the child will teach you what she is curious about, what doesn't interest her, what makes her scared.

Follow her lead as you answer her questions about cremation. Give her only as much information as she wants to know. If she has more questions, she'll probably ask—especially if you've shown her that you are someone who will answer her questions honestly and openly.

Understand Cremation Yourself

Most adults have never been taught exactly what happens during cremation. Let's review that information first.

Cremation takes place at a building called a *crematory* or *crematorium*. Sometimes crematories are adjacent to funeral homes, but often they are stand-alone operations not affiliated with a specific funeral home. There are more than 1,000 crematories in the United States and Canada today.

Within the crematory is a special stainless steel vault called a *cremation chamber*, or *retort* (pronounced REtort). The body is placed in a sturdy cardboard container and the container is slid into the cremation chamber. The body may also be cremated in a casket. After the container or casket is placed in the cremation chamber, the chamber door is tightly sealed and the operator turns on the heat.

A gas jet creates a white hot heat in the back of the cremation chamber. Because of the intensity of the heat, the body ignites and burns until only bone fragments remain. This process takes approximately 2-3 hours.

After the cremation, the remains are collected in a metal tray. At this point the remains are small pieces of bone. To further reduce them, the remains are placed in a processor and refined down to the consistency of coarse sand.

The white or grayish remains, often called *ashes* or *cremated remains* at this stage, are then sealed in a transparent plastic bag along with an identification tag. The bag weighs about 5 lbs. and is similar in size to a 5-lb. bag of sugar. Often the family requests that the cremated remains be placed in an urn, which can then be buried, placed in a columbarium (which is a special above-ground structure at a cemetery), taken home or transported for scattering.

Keep Your Explanations Simple

Now that you better understand the process of cremation, perhaps you can decide how much information you would like to share with the child in your care.

Whatever information you choose to share, take care to use words that he will understand. This depends not only on the child's age, but also his developmental level, his personality and his vocabulary. If your words and your tone convey that you are comfortable with the process of cremation, the child will likely feel the same way.

Think twice before withholding *all* information about cremation from children. Some would say that cremation is too violent a process to explain to children, yet children can cope with what they know. They cannot cope with what they don't know or have never been told. Often their imaginations can conjure up explanations much scarier than reality.

Also be careful about using euphemisms or even fibbing to children in an attempt to protect them from the truth. For example, if a child is told that God took the person to heaven yet the adults around her are all talking about something called cremation or ashes, she may well become more confused and upset than she would have been if a compassionate adult gently told her the truth.

Some Child-Friendly Cremation Information

- There is no smell and no smoke when a body is cremated. It just gets very hot-about three times as hot as your oven at home can get. The heat burns away all the parts of the body except for some pieces of bone.
- After cremation, what's left of the body looks like fishbowl rocks or kitty litter, except it's white because it's bone. It's put in a clear plastic bag so you can see it if you want to.
- When a dead body is buried in the ground, it breaks down after months and years and just a skeleton is left. Cremation makes this happen much, much faster.
- Cremation has been used for thousands of years. The ancient Greeks and Romans built funeral pyres (rhymes with hires), which were stacks of wood the body was put on top of. The wood was set afire and the body burned, too. Funeral pyres are still used in India today.
- Cremation doesn't hurt. The person is dead, which means the body doesn't work anymore. It's heart doesn't beat, it's brain has stopped working, it doesn't breathe and it doesn't feel anything anymore.
- The people doing the cremation take it very seriously and handle the body with a lot of respect. Just like you do, they understand that _____ (the person who died) was a unique, special person who deserves to leave this world with dignity.

Include the Child and You'll Be Helping Her Heal

Children who are included in funeral planning, are encouraged to view the body (if culturally appropriate) and attend the funeral, and are compassionately guided through all these steps are best prepared to begin their journeys toward healing. Including the child also means helping her understand cremation if she lets you know she is curious.

Remember that any child old enough to love is old enough to mourn. And children who mourn need our honesty, our love and our acceptance of their many thoughts and feelings-and questions and concerns-if they are to heal.

Be Available in the Coming Weeks and Months

Death may be the most difficult thing in life to understand, even for adults. The child in your care may have lingering questions for months, even years, after the event of the death itself.

Remain available to the child as time passes. Support him in his unique grief journey. The child who was not curious about cremation at the time of the funeral may well have questions about it later on.

The Language of Funerals

Remember to use simple, concrete language when talking to children about death. Here are some suggestions for explaining funeral terms:

Ashes What is left of a dead body after cremation. Looks (also called cremated like chunky sand or fishbowl rocks except it's white or remains) gray. People commonly refer to these as "ashes" because of the Biblical passage that says "from ashes to ashes, dust to dust." However, the remains don't really look like ashes, so it's probably more appropriate to refer to them as "cremated remains."

Burial Placing the body (which is inside a casket or urn, if the body was cremated) into the ground.

Casket A special box for burying a dead body.

Cemetery A place where many dead bodies and ashes are buried.

Columbarium A little building at a cemetery where ashes are stored. Kind of like a grave that's above the ground.

Cremation The dead body is put in a special metal container that gets very hot inside. The heat burns away all of the body parts except some small pieces of bone.

Dead When a person's body stops working. It doesn't see, hear, feel, eat, breathe, etc. anymore.

Funeral A time when friends and families get together to say goodbye and remember the person who died.

Funeral home A place where bodies are kept until they are buried or cremated.

Grave The hole in the ground where the body or ashes are buried at the cemetery.

Obituary A short article in the paper that tells about the person who died.

Scattering When the dead person's cremated remains are respectfully scattered onto the ground or water (or sometimes in the air) at a place that was special to him or her.

Urn A special container that holds the cremated person's ashes.

Viewing The time when people can see the body of the person who died and say goodbye.

About the Author

Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt is a noted author, educator and practicing grief counselor. He serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado and presents dozens of grief-related workshops each year across North America. Among his books are *Healing Your Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas* and *The Healing Your Grieving Heart Journal for Teens*. For more information, write or call The Center for Loss and Life Transition, 3735 Broken Bow Road, Fort Collins, Colorado 80526, (970) 226-6050 or visit their website, www.centerforloss.com.