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TIPS FOR SUPPORTING KIDS AT THE FUNERAL HOME

1 ACKNOWLEDGE CHILDREN & TEENS

Kids want to be acknowledged and affirmed. Sometimes they also want to be left alone in the shadows. No matter how a child wants to be seen during a funeral, kids want adults to acknowledge them and affirm that the death was important. Kids want to know that they matter and you care.

2 FOLLOW THEIR LEAD

Every kid responds differently to death. Their needs and reactions can change on a daily basis, which can be confusing to adults. Check-in with kids before, during, and after the funeral. Don't assume that what they said two days ago is still true today.

3 HELP THEM UNDERSTAND

A child's grief process can be described by these three characteristics:

1. thoughts
2. feelings; and
3. reinvesting in the world.

A child's grief is directed by how they think and feel about the death. The thinking process helps a child process the death and come to understand a person's "deadness" and "goneness." The funeral very much helps with a child's processing. Give them opportunities to ask questions about dead bodies and the funeral.

4 TAKE THE TIME

You want to be helpful and make a difference. So, take the time preparing the parents, getting to know the kids, and creating a safe environment. Make a referral to a children's bereavement center in your community. In the meantime, the family will be put on the right road to healthy coping because you took the time when it mattered.

5 PLAY AND TOYS ARE KEY

Children experience a wide variety of feelings; however, children can struggle expressing their feelings, which can lead to physical ailments. It is important to give kids the space, toys, and craft materials they need in order to express their feelings and thoughts. If we only look for words or try to force children to speak their grief then we will miss what they really have to say about it. Have toys, crafts, and activities for kids to do at the funeral home.

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6 CREATE A SAFE SPACE

Kids depend on adults to create a safe space for them to explore and try to understand that an important person has died. Help a child express their grief by giving them an opportunity to take ownership of a ritual just for them. Give them permission to create their own ritual or provide a few ideas for things they can do at the funeral home or cemetery.

7 BE INCLUSIVE

Kids learn by touching, seeing, and doing. A child will have a much more positive and helpful experience during funeral rituals if they are included in decisions and key elements of the rituals, if they have a voice in making decisions, and if they are given opportunities to contribute to the ritual. The majority of kids want to participate in funerals. Strongly encourage parents to include them and explore the parent's fears if they are hesitant. Get resources to educate the parents. Quickly!

8 PREPARE PARENTS & KIDS

Many children are not properly prepared for what they will see and what they can expect during a funeral. However, when kids are empowered with knowledge they are better equipped for what they will experience, increasing their sense of safety and their ability to contribute and get the support they need. Sometimes, kids just need a break from death, so kid friendly spaces and a designated person to support the kids can be helpful.

9 USE APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE

Kids are best prepared when euphemisms and clichés are not used. Using the word "dead" is much more helpful than "passed away." Kids can better understand what it means to be dead by understanding what it means to be alive. When talking about death with kids, work with what they already know and use references they understand, such as Disney characters, nature, pets, and other previous experiences with death.

10 KEEP IT REAL

Meet kids where they are both emotionally and physically. Get down to their level, see them at eye level, and engage them in a manner that feels safe and comfortable. This experience is very real for kids. There is no need to sugarcoat or have a stiff demeanor. Loosen up. Be a kid. Use humor. Play. Laugh. Keep it real . . . they'll trust you more and have a better experience if they can relate to you as the "nice guy or girl where we last saw daddy."