



SUGGESTIONS FOR FUNERAL DIRECTORS



The grief experienced by a parent after the death of their child at any age is profound and like no other. Many Funeral Directors have expressed that a child's death is one of the most difficult situations to provide funeral services. The challenges include caring for and preparing the child's body, meeting with the family to plan for burial/cremation, and funeral/memorial services, and follow up or referrals for after-care. Here are a few suggestions for funeral directors caring for bereaved families after a child dies.

ACKNOWLEDGE AND VALIDATE THE DEPTH OF THE LOSS

No parent plans or expects to outlive their child, whether they are a young child, adolescent, young adult, or older adult. Parents have a unique love and special grief that only those who have experienced the death of a child can fully understand. Even hours and days after their child's death, bereaved parents are often overwhelmed with platitudes and advice from others that fall short of comfort and add to their pain. As the first line of professional support after a death, funeral directors and funeral home staff have a unique opportunity to offer a safe place that acknowledges this special relationship and validates the depth of loss a parent is experiencing. Here are some suggestions:

Choose Caring Language, Avoid Dismissive Language, Imparting Beliefs, and Advice Giving

Dismissive language is any word or phrase that attempts to give advice, dismiss the depth of the loss, offer insights about the situation, or diminish the intensity of the experience. Typically, this will be phrases that start with words like, "at least..." or "I understand...", for example:

"At least you can have more children."

"At least they are out of pain."

"At least you don't have to watch them suffer anymore."

"I understand just how you feel."

It is also tempting to try to impart words of wisdom or impose our beliefs on a bereaved parent. This might be phrases like, “Everything happens for a reason,” or “They are in a better place.” It can also be phrases that start with “You should...,” or “Have you thought about...”. While these may be well-meaning, they are often hurtful to bereaved parents and contribute to their pain, rather than lessen it.

Instead, choose caring and supportive language. This is language that expresses your care for the person and your desire to be a support to them. Use their child’s name when you are speaking with the family and making arrangements. Here is an example of caring and supportive language:

“My condolences on your loss. I am sorry you are having to go through this. We are here to care for you and your family the best we can. We are using the utmost care for [name of child] and we are here to walk with you each step of the way.”

Guide Parents through Their Options with Patience, Empathy, and Flexibility

Parents do not plan for a child to die. All the arrangements surrounding the disposition of their child’s body, funeral, memorial service, and other responsibilities is overwhelming. Parents need a patient, empathetic guide to walk with them through each step in this process. The funeral director acts as a guide to all the options available to them for the burial, funeral, and memorial and companions the parents as they make the best decisions they can at the time, and under the circumstances. Be prepared with ideas from past experiences and various options to walk them through. At the same time, be open to and offer them the opportunity to personalize the experience to meet their needs.

PROVIDE HELPFUL RESOURCES AND REFERRALS

While advice giving is out of place, offering helpful resources and referrals can be helpful. It is important to have a plan for providing these resources as part of after-care for the first 24 months after the death. In the beginning, you may provide a packet of information with helpful book titles, pamphlets, and referrals for support groups. Keep in mind that, early in grief, bereaved parents may not have the capacity to fully absorb these resources. Plan for periodic mailings or communications that you might send to bereaved parents and families as reminders of your care for them and awareness of the resources available to them for support. Introduce yourself to your local Compassionate Friends Chapter and include this information in your correspondences and referrals. Work with your local chapter to have bereaved parents further along in their grief to review these resources and make suggestions. This partnership will be invaluable to you as you offer the compassionate care that parents and families need most after their loss.

HAVE A WAY TO ACKNOWLEDGE HOW A CHILD’S DEATH IMPACTS YOU AND YOUR STAFF

The death of a child is not just difficult for the parents and family. It is important to acknowledge the impact a child’s death has on you and your staff. Our tendency is to isolate or avoid feeling our own feelings of grief about the situation. This only internalizes our distress, which can lead to an array of unhealthy thoughts and behaviors. On the other hand, acknowledgement, validation, and mutual support are powerful tools that can help you and your staff maintain a healthy outlook when managing a tragic situation. Together with your staff, discuss what might be helpful ways to acknowledge the importance of a child’s life, the care you have provided, and the hope you have for the family. You might create a ritual of providing a floral arrangement, donations to a special fund, or debriefing session after a child’s death. Whatever you choose, offer an opportunity for you and your staff to acknowledge your own thoughts and feelings so you can continue to be there for families as they need you. Thank you for all that you do.



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