

Viewing a body with a child

Viewing a dead body may feel like a very grown-up thing for a child to do and many adults will understandably have reservations. People have different views or may assume that a child will find it too upsetting. It inevitably happens at a time when you may be struggling with your own feelings of disbelief and sadness. When the death is sudden, it's even harder to decide what is going to be helpful for your children.

It wouldn't have made me feel worse. It would have made me feel a lot better to have at least seen her rather than just stare at photos of her.

Christina, aged 10, whose sister was stillborn

I think I'd rather that my last memory was him going out the door that morning.

Sarah, aged 17

Provided they are given a choice and are well prepared, bereaved children tell us that seeing the body is something that they do not regret doing. Children usually view bodies to say goodbye, or to gain reassurance that the body is at peace, especially if the death was in traumatic circumstances. They tell us that this helps to put their minds at rest and that the real thing, however difficult, is never as bad as imagined thoughts and unanswered questions. For many, it helps them start to understand the reality of what being dead means.

Be guided by what feels right for you and your children, but it can help to talk things through with someone from outside the family.

It is important that children do not feel under pressure to view a body to please adults, or because they think that it is something that they are expected to do. Even children who have chosen to do this may feel quite unsure, so it is good to reassure them that they can change their minds right up until the last minute. If they feel they need to keep their distance, looking in through the door is another option. Try to organise a preparatory viewing without the child. This will enable you to experience your own initial reactions without having to support your child at the

same time. An added benefit is that you will be able to describe to the child exactly what they will see, hear and feel.

A child may have a different understanding from an adult of what we mean by the word 'body'. If a young child is asked to draw a 'body' they often produce just a torso. It is therefore essential to ensure the child is aware that when we use this term, we mean an entire body including a head, arms and legs.

How to respond if a child asks where a body is or if they can see it

When someone close to them has died, it is not unusual for a child to be anxious about the body being OK, safe and cared for. Sometimes just knowing where the body is and who is looking after it is all they need. Others require more pieces of the story filled in for them and may ask to see the body. This is perfectly natural and, for some, is what they need to do in order to make some sense of what has happened.

'If you think that you would like to see Granny's body that is OK. Going to see Granny's body is a good opportunity for you to say your own special goodbye to her. It might help you to understand that Granny really is dead and that she is not going to be around anymore. We are all going to miss her a lot.'

'You do not have to decide now, but if you think that you would like to do this, I will come with you. Granny's body is at the Funeral Home. I will ask the people at the Funeral Home when we would be able to go. Once we know when that will be, we can chat about it again and see if you still would like to go.'

This may be all you need to say at this stage, but more explanation might be asked for at some point.

'Different people have different feelings when they see a body. You might want to cry, you might not. You can spend as long or as little time with Granny's body as you want.'

'If you want to, you can take something with you to leave with Granny's body, perhaps some flowers, or you could draw a picture if you wanted and take that. What do you think?'

The Viewing

If a child chooses to see the body, they need to be prepared as much as possible. Remind them that the body is dead, has no life, and feels nothing. It helps them to know what will be in the room, who will be in the room, what the body will look like, what it is covered with, or a description of any clothes that it is dressed in. The body may be in a coffin or laid out on a table, depending on where the viewing takes place. Whatever they will experience needs to be explained to them beforehand.

'You will only see Granny's body, not anyone else's. She will be lying in a long box called a coffin. The room will be quiet and only you and I and the man from the funeral home will be there. Granny will look very pale and her eyes will be shut. Granny is dressed in one of her favourite dresses, the one she wore on her birthday.'

Some children choose to take something such as a small bunch of flowers or a toy or drawing to leave. This can help them to feel that they have contributed with their own special gift. Stephen was 8 years old when his much-loved grandmother died. He left a small picture of himself on her pillow to 'take with her.' He did not ask where she had gone but seemed happy to believe that she had gone somewhere.

Just before going in to view, reassure the child that if they have changed their mind, that is perfectly OK. If they have brought something to leave say that, if they wish, you will take it in on their behalf.

It is important that you feel comfortable taking your child. It is very understandable if it all feels rather overwhelming and your child picks up on this. If this is the case, try to find another trusted adult who can stand in for you. Some families go as a group and your child can be a part of this while you remain behind.

How to respond if the child asks to touch the body

Touching the dead body, as long as it is their choice, can help children to understand the concept of being dead, and start to grasp the reality of what has happened. Should they ask to touch the body, children need to know in advance what it will feel like. If a body is badly damaged or disfigured, extra special preparation will be needed. You can call our helpline for further guidance.

'If you want to touch her you can but you do not have to. She will feel cold and her skin will be very pale. This is because the blood has stopped pumping round her body.'

Adults can show a child it is OK to touch a body by their behaviour rather than by making a direct suggestion. If an adult kisses Granny on the cheek, a child observing this gets the message that doing so is OK but will not feel under pressure to do the same.

Afterwards

Be aware that you may be upset after viewing the body, but the child with you may or may not be upset. It is not unusual for a child to carry on as though nothing of any significance has happened. Questions and reactions will come later, at a time when they feel more able to think about the situation.

Children can only deal with powerful emotions for a short time and they are good at having 'time out' from overwhelming feelings. This means that they may appear unaffected but of course, they are not.

Isla didn't go in with fear, it seemed to be the most natural thing in the world for her to do. She took her a drawing and a favourite photograph for Nanny to keep. She walked into the room and pulled up the little chair that was next to the bed, gently stroked her arms, hair and face and gave her a kiss. She didn't really say very much to her other than 'I love you', but just spent a little time sitting with her. The chance to make things 'real' seemed to help her process what had happened and understand the finality of her death.

Isla's mother

Isla was three and a half when her nanny died, and she had lots of questions about why her nanny couldn't come back. Isla asked repeatedly to see her Nanny in order to say goodbye.

Isla's mother notes, however, that two other children in the family aged 13 and 15 chose not to view the body, saying they wanted to remember her as she was when she was alive.

It is important therefore to allow all children in a family to make their own choices and not be expected to do what someone else has chosen. The key is ensuring that they are doing it because they want to and that they and you are fully prepared for it beforehand.

I tried not to take my own 'baggage' into the room and was led by Isla. It was a beautiful moment to watch, which was completely unexpected.

Isla's mother

Resources and further reading

Available from bookshops or online booksellers, unless otherwise stated.

Other Child Bereavement UK information sheets you may find helpful.

These can be downloaded from our website: www.childbereavementuk.org

- *Explaining funerals, burial and cremation to children*
- *Explaining to young children that someone has died*
- *Supporting bereaved children under 5*
- *What helps grieving children and young people*

Someone Has Died Suddenly

Mary Williams

Available free of charge from Brake, the Road Safety Charity. For children and adults to read together, this book uses simple language and colourful pictures to encourage honest, open discussion between children and their carers. It includes a short explanation on what happens to the body, discusses seeing the body and examines common feelings after a sudden death.

Available from www.suddendeadth.org

What Happened to Daddy's Body?

Elke and Alex Barber

Explains what happens after death in words very young children can understand, using simple text and colourful illustrations. Although it does not address visiting a body after death, it looks at what happens at a crematorium and covers what ashes look and feel like and what might be done with them. Published by Jessica Kingsley.

What Happens When Someone Dies?

Jenny Armstrong

Uses photographs to give a clear, simple account of what happens after someone dies. Gives clear explanations of a room in a chapel of rest, a coffin, a hearse and what a body may look like. Available from SeeSaw:

www.seesaw.org.uk

Further resources and/or references are available from Child Bereavement UK, upon request.