

# Grief

By Angie Koeneker

A photograph of two women sitting at a table in a room with wood-paneled walls. The woman on the left is wearing a pink polo shirt and has a small gold emblem on her chest. The woman on the right is wearing a dark, patterned sleeveless top. On the table in front of them are several children's toys, including a red and blue toy car, a blue bucket, and various stuffed animals like teddy bears and a Minnie Mouse plush. A lamp is visible in the background.

## Kids Say Goodbye: Changing How Children Experience Funerals

The National Center for Grieving Children and Families states, *“What happens or doesn’t happen at a funeral will be forever remembered by a child.”*

Although we try to shield our children from the unpleasantness of life, one in seven children will experience the death of a parent or sibling by the age of 20 according to Comfort Zone Camp, and when we take into account the death of friends, grandparents and other family members, this number increases significantly.

And yet, specific programming within the funeral home setting to address the immediate needs of children throughout the process of a visitation or funeral is still emerging. In fact, research within the funeral home community finds that almost two-thirds of respondents did not provide any support services for bereaved children.

The reasons ranged from a lack of expertise to cost to an inability to develop services. But there was also another – and more concerning – reason: a perceived lack of need.

There is no question caregivers experiencing a loss have a lot to consider following the death of a loved one. They must contact family members, plan services and arrange for personal matters to be attended to. Addressing the needs of children can be overlooked, or, too often, it is assumed children do not understand what is happening and therefore need not be involved.

But the literature on children’s grief shows the exact opposite: even infants and toddlers can sense a change in their caregiver following a loss. Preschoolers, older children and teens do need explanations about death given to them in a developmentally appropriate way.

In its publication, *“What About the Kids? Understanding Their Needs in Funeral Planning and Services,”* The National Center for Grieving Children and Families recommends

children be given the choice on whether to attend a funeral or visitation. In order to make this decision, children must be given an appropriate explanation of what to expect, including what they will see, hear and the duration of the service. Additionally, the organization points out that children can be incorporated into the funeral or visitation in a variety of ways, such as choosing a reading, music or creating special artwork to remember their loved one.

Having worked in the field of child life for more than 15 years, I have become too familiar with the calls to come to the hospital room to help children say goodbye to a parent, grandparent or sibling. Often I found myself with a family in crisis, carefully choosing the words to explain what was happening.

Child life, a field to which I owe so much, is typically found in pediatric

hospitals, though it has recently begun to expand to other community settings. Child life specialists assist children, teens and families with coping with illness, procedures, loss and bereavement. Therapeutic play is incorporated into child life visits to help children and teens cope with the stresses of the unknown. Additionally, child life specialists frequently assist families with conversations about end of life with their children. Many child life specialists are contacted to provide consultation services to children of adult patients to help them say goodbye.

Many times I have wondered about the children who may not have had the opportunity to say goodbye in a hospital or hospice setting. I thought about the family struggling to make decisions and plans about their loved one's arrangements. Who helps them prepare a child for a funeral or visitation? In the midst of planning and grief, has anyone thought about the specific developmental needs of children when it comes to a funeral or visitation?

A year ago, I began my search to partner with a funeral director in northern New Jersey to introduce the idea of child life services for children attending funerals. I put together information to share on children and funerals and reached out to area funeral homes to provide this information and discuss creating separate programming for children. Izabela Van Tassel, owner of the Van Tassel Funeral Home in Bloomfield, New Jersey, was not only open to the idea of changing how kids experience funerals, but had already recognized this need by committing a space for a playroom within her funeral home.

As we began to look at how we could impact how children experience visitations and funerals, we turned to research on the topic and frequently asked questions by caregivers:

- Should children attend a funeral?
- How involved should children be in the planning of the service?
- How can we provide a developmentally appropriate way for children to say goodbye?



**Opposite page: Izabela Van Tassel (right), owner of Van Tassel Funeral Home, with child life specialist Angie Koeneker. Above: Artwork created by children and teens to help them say goodbye to loved ones. (Photos courtesy of Izabela Van Tassel)**

Through the use of therapeutic activities, preparation and support, a child life specialist can be a valuable tool when a child encounters the unfamiliar setting of a funeral or visitation.

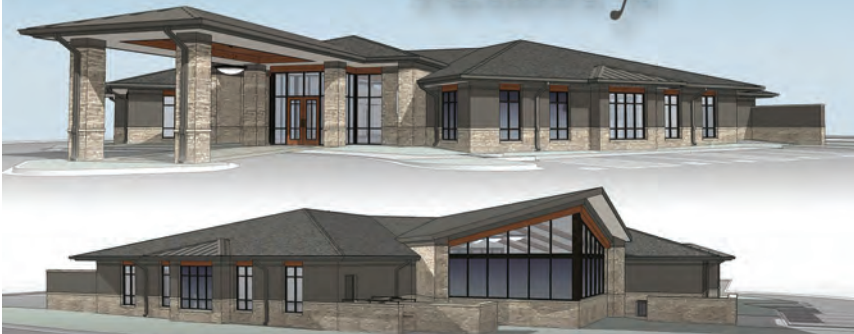
Taking all of this into consideration, Izabela and I set out to change how children experience funerals in her funeral home. We began by creating a formal preparation program for children and families. This program consists of meeting with a certified child life specialist to talk about what happens at a funeral or visitation, address misconceptions and provide developmentally appropriate answers.

As a part of the preparation program, we recognized that we needed

a tool to help children understand what they can expect when visiting. Early in the partnership, a preparation book was created that was specific to the funeral home and written for children using developmentally appropriate explanations and pictures of various things they may see, including a casket, urn, etc. A guided tour is also included, with attention being paid to what the child will see and hear and length of time of the service.

We assumed, when taking on this challenge, that many children and families would miss the preparation piece and would need additional programming to provide an inclusive experience for children attending funeral services. This is indeed what

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has often happened and, therefore, the largest part of our program consists of a child life specialist providing therapeutic activities and support during the funeral or visitation. During the initial meeting with the family following a death, Izabela inquires about any children that may be involved or will be attending the funeral. It is then that a discussion about support for children and our program is introduced.

Each funeral or visitation is unique, as is our approach with each child and family. While the funeral director attends to the family and service, the child life specialist meets with children in an adjoining room. Izabela is key to the success of getting children involved by inviting them (when they arrive) to meet with me and participate in an activity.

A room is set aside where children can take breaks without their caregivers having to worry about them and where they are given the opportunity to participate in separate programming. The room is separate from the main funeral space. Toys line the walls, including cars, dolls, blocks and soft stuffed animals – all available for children to play with at any time. Tables and chairs are available for art and letter-writing activities.

Within this space, a child life specialist facilitates therapeutic activities for children and teens to create works of art to say goodbye to their loved ones. Examples include letters that were then placed in the casket, illustrations of loved ones going to heaven and messages of "I love you" on hearts to be incorporated into the service. Other children have chosen not to create artwork but have utilized play to process the funeral experience. All activities can be adapted to any age and, indeed, we have had children as young as 3 and as old as 18 who have participated.

This partnership between a child life specialist and the funeral director has been met with praise. One family noted having this service went the extra mile when it came to their experience. Others have commented on the tributes their children

have provided as being such a special piece of the overall service.

Several families shared that the partnership and availability of a professional child life specialist eased their concerns and provided an inclusive role for their children. This was illustrated most recently when a child was tentative upon entering the funeral home. He peeked into the room where the other children were but was hesitant to join. Eventually deciding to enter and sit at the table, he created an intricate rose for his loved one. When finished, he placed his work on her casket and shared that he was glad he came and about how much he wanted to give her something to remember him. Afterward, he was more relaxed and began to play.

Many families have expressed surprise that a service like this existed and felt relieved that their children had an opportunity to say goodbye in a way that was comfortable for them. In fact, many children, upon seeing a space with art materials, immediately seize on the opportunity to interact with the child life specialist and create their own tributes. It is in this safe space that children have asked questions about the deceased such as, "Is she wearing shoes?" "What happens when this is over?" and "Where does his body go?" Many children shared their memories and messages for their loved ones. One child took the opportunity to share her favorite memories of her sister and worked with the child life specialist to create multiple purple flowers to be included in the casket with her.

The National Center for Grieving Children and Families says, "There are no right or wrong ways to say goodbye. But there are goodbyes that help and others that hinder the healing process."

It is my hope that, as the field of child life expands beyond the hospital walls and the field of mortuary services continues to evolve, the relationship between these two professions will increasingly grow in order to change how children experience funerals. •

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