

## Mini-Articles: Funeral Attendance

### To Help Grieving Families, Offer Advice on Funeral Attendance

When a student has experienced the death of a loved one, school professionals have a unique opportunity to offer helpful guidance to families. Parents frequently contact schools immediately after the death, and before the funeral or memorial service has taken place.

This means that school personnel may be the only professionals in touch with the family during the time the funeral is being planned. Families may be confused about their child's role in the process. Some parents may want their child to participate. Others may hesitate, wishing to protect their child from what they fear will be a painful experience.

Ideally, children will be afforded the opportunity to make their own choice about funeral attendance. Most of the time, it is better if children do attend. They will feel more included, benefit from the support of family and friends, and learn more about coping with their own grief by watching others.

School professionals can offer guidance to families about the benefits of funeral attendance and how to best prepare a child for a funeral or memorial. For example, families can give children a sense of what will happen during the service. Will there be an open casket? Will many people be present? Is this likely to be an emotional and expressive service, or something more restrained?

Children will appreciate a chance to ask questions—even if they don't have any at the moment. During the service, it's helpful to request that an adult who is not as personally impacted by the death mentor the child through the experience, especially for younger children.

For more guidance on how school professionals can help families prepare children for funerals and memorials, check the website of the [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](#). The website's materials are designed specifically for school professionals. Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## **Death in the School Community: What Policies Should Schools Set About Funeral Attendance?**

A death in the school community—a student, teacher or staff member—touches many people. Students and school staff are likely to be deeply affected. Some individuals may wish to attend the funeral or memorial service.

In general, it is helpful when schools support attendance at services for interested students and staff. These services can provide comfort as people struggle to make sense of a loss.

It is important that attendance be a choice, not an expectation. Some students and staff may prefer not to attend, and their choices must be respected.

Schools will want to have policies and practices in place that address such matters as:

- Obtaining permission from parents for a student to attend if the service is during school hours. (For young children, it may be most appropriate to ask parents to personally accompany their child.)
- Hiring substitute teachers or arranging coverage in other ways so school personnel can attend.
- Considering whether to modify the school schedule to make it easier on students to attend if they wish (for example, ending the day early or postponing tests).
- Providing alternative activities for students who choose not to attend the funeral.

If many students and staff are likely to attend, schools should also talk with the family of the deceased to help them prepare. The family may decide to hold the service at a larger location. If this is not practical, or doesn't meet the needs and wishes of the family, members of the school community might plan alternative ways to show their caring and remembrance.

In most cases, it's best to avoid using school facilities for funeral services, especially if the body of the deceased will be present. This can create painful associations with that space for students and staff in the future. However, religious schools may have an on-site space, such as a chapel, that would be appropriate.

For more guidance on ways schools can plan sound policies, as well as how school professionals can help families prepare children for these events, check the website of the [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](#). The website's materials are designed specifically for school professionals. Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

## **When a Loved One Dies: Is Funeral Attendance Good for Children?**

Families may turn to school personnel for advice on funeral attendance. Will it cause unnecessary pain for their grieving child? Is it acceptable for the child to play a role in the memorial proceedings? How can families prepare and support children before and during the service?

There are a number of benefits for children who attend funeral or memorial services.

- They feel included and affirmed.
- They are comforted by the support of family and friends.
- They may gain support from the family's spiritual community.
- They learn more about their own grief when they see the different ways people grieve and seek support.
- They appreciate participating in an important event or ritual.

In most situations, it is helpful for children to attend the funeral or memorial of a loved one. When children are not included, they may feel hurt, discounted or excluded. In some cases, they create fantasies about the service that are far more frightening than what actually occurs.

For more guidance on how families can prepare children for these events, check the website of the [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](#). The website's materials are designed specifically for school professionals. Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

The Coalition to Support Grieving Students was convened by the New York Life Foundation, a pioneering advocate for the cause of childhood bereavement, and the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, which is led by pediatrician and childhood bereavement expert David J. Schonfeld, M.D. The Coalition has worked with Scholastic Inc., a long-standing supporter of teachers and kids, to create [grievingstudents.org](http://grievingstudents.org), a groundbreaking, practitioner-oriented website designed to provide educators with the information, insights, and practical advice they need to better understand and meet the needs of the millions of grieving kids in America's classrooms.