

## ***HELPING CHILDREN UNDERSTAND CREMATION***

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### ***The Adult as Role Model and Helper***

A child you care about is grieving the loss of someone loved. If you, too, loved the person who died, you are now faced with the difficult but critical task of helping both yourself and the child heal. Throughout the coming months, you will be both a role model and a helper to the bereaved child in your care.

One of the first opportunities for you and the child to express your grief is the funeral. But sometimes the funeral can seem strange or confusing to children if they are not gently guided through the experience. Many aspects of the funeral must be explained at this unique child's developmentally appropriate level.

If the body is to be cremated (which is happening more and more today), you may want to explain to the child in your care what cremation is. This article will help you be both compassionate and direct as you talk about cremation.

### ***Children Are Naturally Curious***

Children are naturally curious about everything, including death. But death is a taboo subject in many families. A parent or family member who would gladly help a child with his science homework may be uncomfortable answering the same child's questions about death, funerals, and cremation.

You can help by being someone the child can turn to with his questions. Encourage him to ask you anything he wants to about the death and the funeral. Give him honest answers in words he will understand.

### ***Follow the Lead of Each Unique Child***

If there is one rule of thumb to keep in mind as you guide this child through the funeral experience, it is this: Follow the child's lead. If you listen to her and pay attention to her behaviors, the child will teach you what she is curious about, what doesn't interest her, and what makes her scared.

Follow her lead as you answer her questions about cremation. Give her only as much information as she wants to know. If she has more questions, she'll probably ask—especially if you've shown her that you are someone who will answer her questions honestly and openly.

### ***Understand Cremation Yourself***

Most adults have never been taught exactly what happens during cremation. Let's review that information first.

Cremation takes place at a building called a *crematory* or *crematorium*. Sometimes crematories are adjacent to funeral homes, but often they are stand-alone operations not affiliated with a specific funeral home. There are more than 1,000 crematories in the United States and Canada today.

Within the crematory is a special stainless steel vault called a cremation chamber, or retort (pronounced REtort). The body is placed in a sturdy cardboard container and the container is slid into the cremation chamber. The body may also be cremated in a casket. After the container or casket is placed in the cremation chamber, the chamber door is tightly sealed and the operator turns on the heat.

A gas jet creates a white-hot heat in the back of the cremation chamber. Because of the intensity of the heat, the body ignites and burns until only bone fragments remain. This process takes approximately two to three hours.

After the cremation, the remains are collected in a metal box. At this point, the remains look like pieces of bone. To further reduce them and make them more appropriate for scattering, the remains are placed in a processor and refined down to the consistency of coarse sand.

The white or grayish remains, often called *ashes* at this stage, are then sealed in a transparent plastic bag along with an identification tag. The bag weighs about five pounds and is similar in size to a five-pound bag of sugar. Often the family requests that the ashes be placed in an urn, which can then be buried, placed in a columbarium (which is a special above-ground structure at a cemetery), or used to transport the ashes for scattering.

### ***Keep Your Explanations Simple***

Now that you better understand the process of cremation, perhaps you can decide how much information you would like to share with the child in your care.

Whatever information you choose to share, take care to use words that he will understand. This depends not only on the child's age, but also his developmental level, his personality, and his vocabulary. If your words and your tone convey that you are comfortable with the process of cremation, the child will likely feel the same way.

Think twice about withholding *all* information about cremation from children. Some would say that cremation is too violent a process to explain to children, yet children can cope with what they know. They cannot cope with what they don't know or

have never been told. Often their imaginations can conjure up explanations much scarier than reality.

Also be careful about using euphemisms or even fibbing to protect children in an attempt to protect them from the truth. For example, if a child is told that God took the person to heaven, yet the adults around her are all talking about something called cremation or ashes, she may well become more confused and upset than she would have been if a compassionate adult gently told her the truth.

### *Some Child-Friendly Cremation Information*

- There is no smell and no smoke when a body is cremated. It just gets very hot—about three times as hot as your oven at home can get. The heat burns away all the parts of the body except some pieces of bone.
- After cremation, what's left of the body looks like fishbowl rocks or kitty litter, except it's white, because it's bones. It's put in a clear plastic bag so you can see it if you want to.
- When a dead body is buried in the ground, it breaks down after months and years and just a skeleton is left. Cremation makes this happen much, much faster.
- Cremation has been used for thousands of years. The ancient Greeks and Romans built funeral pyres (rhymes with hires), which were stacks of wood the body was put on top of. The wood was set afire and the body burned, too. Funeral pyres are still used in India today.
- Cremation doesn't hurt. The person is dead, which means the body doesn't work anymore. Its heart doesn't beat; its brain has stopped working; it doesn't breathe; and, it doesn't feel anything anymore.
- The people doing cremation take it very seriously and handle the body with a lot of respect. Just like you do, they understand that \_\_\_\_\_ (the person who died) was a unique, special person who deserves to leave this world with dignity.