

# Kids and Catholic funerals: Why they should go, and how to prepare

The nice neighbor across the street—the one who is always watching out for your kids—dies. Should you take your kids to the funeral?

I asked a handful of parents about whether parents should take kids to funerals, and the answer was pretty unanimous: yes—with the usual caveats about each child and circumstance being unique. The general feeling, though, was that there are good reasons to bring kids to funerals, despite the anxiety some parents might have about traumatizing their kids by exposing them to death.

## Give kids a choice

[One British survey](#) found nearly half of people think it's inappropriate to take children under the age of twelve to a funeral. But in fact, people who work in the field of child bereavement say that the best approach is to offer children and teens the choice of whether to attend or not—and then talk through that choice with them. If they don't want to go, why not? Younger kids in particular may have misconceptions about what will happen at the funeral. On the other hand, if kids choose to attend the funeral, be sure to give them a heads up on what to expect.

Above all, avoid forcing kids to attend or stay away. "Children who are not allowed to attend a funeral may feel they didn't get their chance to say goodbye," advises the [website of the Dougy Center](#), a national center for grieving children and families. "On the other hand, children who were forced to attend a funeral may feel resentful."

Child bereavement specialist Helen Mackinnon, interviewed for [an article in The Guardian](#), goes further, stating that Winston's Wish, the charity she works for, finds time and again that older kids and adults often resent not having been allowed to attend the funerals of loved ones; in some cases, she says, it extends or complicates the grief process: "It's on this basis that you'll be hard pushed to find any child bereavement expert who doesn't think that, with adequate preparation, it's OK for a child of any age to go to a funeral, if they want to."

"If they want to" also applies to what happens at the wake or funeral itself. Several parents from the Teaching Catholic Kids parent group talked about the practice of forcing kids to kiss the deceased person.

"My sister-in-law was traumatized when she was told to kiss her mother goodbye in the casket," says Mary Gundrum. "At fifty years old, she still talks about how awful that was. She never ended up doing it, running out of the room screaming and crying."

## **Two good reasons to take kids to funerals**

Leaving kids home if they don't want to attend a visitation service or funeral is probably for the best. And leaving babies and toddlers home probably makes sense if you're the caretaker, but you really need to focused on grieving a traumatic death.

But there are at least a couple good reasons to consider taking kids to funerals, both grounded in faith.

One reason for anyone to attend a funeral is to comfort the grieving. It's a real work of mercy, and one that kids—even infants and toddlers—can be very good at, just by being themselves.

"At a wake just yesterday, I noticed how HAPPY a little three-

year-old boy was to say to me, 'Want to come see my (living) grandma?'" says Marni Gillard, another member of the Teaching Catholic Kids parent group. The boy took her to his grandmother and introduced the two. "Then he went to get us both a candy from the dish. His mom laughed, but I could see she'd done something to make it okay for him to be there, to see grampy's open casket, and to feel he was part of it all."

Carla Dobrovitz had a similarly positive—if more intense—experience with taking her children to the funeral of her two-year-old son who had died unexpectedly. "As we all stood around the open casket to pray before closing the casket, my then-four-year-old daughter, on her own accord, reached into the casket and held his hand as we all grabbed hands to pray the Our Father," she says. "It was one of the most powerful moments of my life."

Another good reason to take kids to a funeral is simply to expose them to the reality of death. We're all going to die someday, but many kids grow into adulthood without ever having a first-hand experience of death. Most people die in hospitals, and professionals have taken over much of the responsibility for preparing the body and organizing funeral rituals. Meanwhile, technologists are actively and enthusiastically seeking ways to live forever.

It didn't used to be this way. Throughout human history, most children had several intimate experiences with death before the age of twelve. This was true even a generation ago; Marni Gillard recalls being present at the wake of her grandmother in the living room of her home.

A healthy awareness of death can help us better prioritize the rest of our lives. "Death lends urgency to our lives," says the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. "Remembering our mortality helps us realize that we have only a limited time in which to bring our lives to fulfillment" (#1007).

At the same time, the funeral rites also put death into perspective: "The Christian meaning of death is revealed in the light of the *Paschal mystery* of the death and resurrection of Christ in whom resides our only hope" (*Catechism* #1681).

## **Preparing kids for what to expect**

Bereavement experts agree that preparing kids for what to expect at a visitation service, funeral Mass, or graveside service will help them have a more positive experience.

One way to prepare kids is to regularly take them to funerals where the stakes aren't so high. "I was very glad we had taken our children to many wakes and funerals before" taking them to the funeral of their two-year-old brother, says Carla Dobrovitz. "It made an already terrible situation a bit easier."

Marcy Klatt, another member of the Teaching Catholic Kids parent group, is very intentional about this practice with her own kids:

*I start by taking my kids when they are small to the viewing of people who died they only knew a little bit. This way there is no emotion involved. I let them let me know what is acceptable for them. If they want to go up to see the body, I bring them up and we pray for them. If they want to touch the person's hand, I let them do that. This way they learn what death is. It is a reverent time, but also "casual." This way, when the time comes for a family funeral, they won't be scared. I explain everything to them: the casket, what is going on, what will happen later, etc. I usually don't take them to the funeral Mass or related ceremonies because they are so long, but the viewing is a good time to teach kids about death and what happens after.*

So what can you tell kids to expect? Here's a partial list:

- Kids younger than age seven may have difficulty grasping

the concept of death. Explain that while the deceased person may look like they're sleeping, in fact they are dead—their chest isn't moving up and down, and they won't wake up.

- Describe, in concrete terms, what kids are likely to see and experience at a wake or visitation service. Put names on things: What's a funeral home? What is the role of the funeral home workers? What's that fancy box the deceased person seems to be sleeping in?
- Older kids and teens may want to know (even if they don't ask) what to say and how to act. Explain that while they should be respectful (no playing tag!), it's okay to express emotions, including happy ones.
- If your kids are nervous about what to say to the family and friends of the deceased, spend a little time coaching them. A simple, direct statement of sympathy usually works best: "I'm sorry that your dad died." Simply listening to whatever grieving family and friends want to talk about can also be a simple but appreciated response.

## **Connecting death to faith**

The rituals around a funeral are also an important time to talk about what the Catholic faith has to say about death. Viewed in the light of faith, death takes on a completely new character.

Again, let kids lead—if they clearly want to change the subject, drop it; they're likely to bring it up again when they're ready.

Here are some things to talk about:

- Death, for Christians, is not only a natural event, but also a consequence of original sin (*Catechism* #1008).
- But Christ has transformed death so that it has a

positive meaning for Christians. Through death, Christians complete the act of dying and rising in Christ that was begun with their baptism. Death is the doorway to full incorporation in the life of Christ (*Catechism* #1010).

- The connection between Christian death and baptism is symbolized in the Catholic funeral rite by the white pall over the casket (which ought to remind us of the white garment we put on at baptism) and the sprinkling of the casket with holy water.
- “The Eucharist is the heart of the Paschal reality of Christian death” (*Catechism* #1689). That’s because the Eucharist makes present the Paschal sacrifice of Christ in which the deceased person fully participates; it also is the means by which we experience “communion” with the departed.
- For Christians, then, the day of death is also a kind of “birthday” into new life. This is why Catholics celebrate the saints not on the anniversary of their birth, but the anniversary of their death.

Finally, kids should hear the good news that, thanks to the saving work of Christ, we’re never really separated from one another—not even when death temporarily intervenes. The *Catechism* quotes St. Simeon of Thessalonica’s eloquent words on this reality to conclude its section on Christian funerals: “For even dead, we are not at all separated from one another, because we all run the same course and we will find one another again in the same place. We shall never be separated, for we live for Christ, and now we are united with Christ as we go toward him . . . we shall all be together in Christ.”

## Learn more

- [Bereavement and Funerals](#) (U.S. Catholic bishops)
- [Catechism of the Catholic Church: Dying in Christ Jesus](#)

- [Should Young Children Go to Funerals?](#) (The Guardian)
- [Kids and Funerals](#) (Dougy Center)
- [35 FAQs about Eternity by Peter Kreeft](#)