

Funerals and rituals offer important opportunities for families to start the work of mourning together and adjusting to life after a death. For children, a funeral is helpful in supporting their understanding of what it means to be dead, and a chance to learn from adults healthy ways to express emotions and find connection. However, traditional ways of saying goodbye to someone who died may look differently than they did pre-pandemic. If attending a funeral is not an option, there are still many ways to honor and remember someone who has died in your life.

Erin's House gathered some of our favorite memorial activities to offer suggestions of things you can do together as a family to help memorialize your person.

Before deciding on an activity, please keep these general tips in mind:

**1. Share truthful information about the death.**

Children need honest facts about what it means to be dead so that they can begin to process the death. Use clear, age-appropriate language. Stay away from euphemisms as they are unclear and confusing for children. Instead, explain death in physical ways. Help them understand that someone who is alive must breathe, eat, sleep, etc., but someone who is dead doesn't need to do those things. Explain that someone who is dead no longer feels anything or has a beating heart. You can invite them to put their hand on their heart to facilitate their understanding. Use nature, movies, and past experiences to help children understand when someone dies it means they are not coming back.

**2. Be ready and open to answer any questions they have.**

Children are empowered when they have the facts they need to process new information. If a child is old enough to ask the question, we suggest providing an honest, clear answer. Sometimes that may mean admitting that you don't know the answer, and that is okay! Reassure them that you will let them know if you learn more. If they don't have questions, explain that they can always come to you to ask or talk about anything in the future.

**3. Have conversations about what it means to grieve.**

Children look to adults to help them make sense of changes in their world. They rely on us to help them navigate new, unfamiliar feelings and to learn ways to express themselves in healthy and safe ways. We can help build resilience when we normalize grief, validate their feelings, and give them a safe place to express their emotions. It can be helpful when we explain that grief looks different for everyone and to encourage conversations about ways members within the family can support each other.

#### 4. Explain what a funeral/memorial service is and why you are having one.

Invite, but do not force, a child to participate in a memorial activity. Let them know that there will be other opportunities to memorialize their person if they change their mind.

#### 5. Include children in planning and suggest ways they can be involved.

Think about typical components within a funeral (music, readings, memory sharing, special rituals, etc.) and work together to decide ways to engage in a memorial activity that makes sense for your family. Don't put too much pressure on yourself to get it perfect. Give yourself grace and remember that you can create other opportunities to remember and honor your person at another time. Having the opportunity to acknowledge the death as a family and being able to recognize the special things that made your relationship unique is at the heart of a meaningful memorial.

#### 6. Create a plan for the memorial.

Who will be there, who will you invite via an online platform, where will you do it, what will be included, who is assigned what, and what supplies will you need? Some options to consider include a music playlist, readings, candle lighting, memory sharing, a special ritual or activity, and a moment of silence. Adapt activities in a way that works best for your family.

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Here are a few creative ways you can honor and memorialize your person who died:

#### 1. TIME CAPSULE

Encourage those who are participating to choose something to bury in honor of the person who died. It could be something they made for the person like a card or a drawing, or a personal item that belongs to them or belonged to the person who died. You could make the activity more specific by inviting everyone to write down memories of the person or things they never want to forget about the person, then compiling them all and burying them together. Consider offering the option to read out loud what they wrote or allow someone else to read it for them with their permission. As a family, you can decide on a date to uncover your capsule together and have a chance to consider how your grief has changed over time.

#### 2. MEMORY BOOK

Use paper or index cards and a hole puncher to create a memory book. Encourage your child to choose their favorite photos or to draw pictures to include in the book. Discuss favorite memories and write them on the pages throughout the book. Use stickers, stamps, or magazine clippings to create a memory book that best reflects how your family wants to remember your person.

#### 3. PLANT FLOWERS

Plant flowers together in their honor. You can do this outside in your yard or you can offer the option to let your child decorate their own pot to plant their flowers. As a way to help them explore their feelings and memories, you can ask them to think about painful/sad feelings or memories to write on the inside of the pot and happy/hopeful words to write on the outside of the pot. Explain that sometimes we may want to hide how we are feeling on the inside, but it is important to acknowledge and find ways to express all our feelings, even the hard ones.

#### 4. ROCK GARDEN

Decorate rocks together. Consider writing words that best describe your person using colors, shapes, and drawings that remind you of them or give you hope. Create a space outside for the rocks and allow your child to add to the rock garden whenever they want to. You could also invite them to choose a rock from the garden to hold on to if it brings them comfort.

#### 5. COOK THEIR FAVORITE MEAL

Make a special meal together in honor of your person. Consider making their favorite meal or incorporating a dish they loved. Talk about times when you may want to continue this ritual such as special anniversaries like the person's birthday, favorite holiday, or their death anniversary.

#### 6. CREATE A PLAYLIST

Invite everyone to come up with a song (or a list of songs) that remind them of the person who died or that they have found helpful as they process their grief. Create a playlist of all the songs and allow time for everyone to share what song(s) they chose and why. Look for ways to make the playlist obtainable for everyone involved so that they can have access to it whenever they want to listen on their own or share it with others.

#### 7. DECORATE A PICTURE BOARD

Gather as a family and look through photos together. Promote sharing by allowing for moments of silence and reflection. Allow space for sharing good and bad memories and use the time to discuss how you want your person to be remembered, the lessons they taught you, and what you are grateful for because of knowing them. Put all the pictures on a poster board and designate a special place in your house to place it. Explain to your kids that they can visit the board and look at the pictures whenever they are missing their person.

#### 8. WRITE A EULOGY TOGETHER

Even if a eulogy was already written, consider inviting your family to participate in writing their own eulogy in honor of the person who died. Ask them to consider what made the person special to them, if the person had special gifts, hobbies, or interests they think should be included, and if there are special life events that should be mentioned. Consider asking if anyone would like to read the eulogy out loud during your special memorial service.

#### 9. MEMORY BRACELETS

Use different colored or lettered beads and string to make memory bracelets. Encourage children to share a memory or a feeling for the different beads they choose and invite them to make bracelets for other friends and family who are grieving, too. Plan a time to deliver the bracelets together once it is safe to visit again.

#### 10. MEMORY LANTERNS

Use glass jars, tissue paper, and glue to make memory lanterns. Simply choose the colors and sizes of tissue paper that you want, arrange them on the jar, and glue them down. Once the outside of the jar is dry, place a candle in it and choose a time to light it in honor of the person. Consider sharing a memory or something you loved about the person before lighting the candle and including a moment of silence after it is lit.