



Explaining Cremation to Children

"Explaining death to children is hard enough, but what do I say when a child asks me what cremation is?"

Cremation can be explained to children if and when they ask; just remember to follow each unique child's lead and use words he or she 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 the child and pay attention to the behaviors, the child will teach you what they are curious about, what doesn't interest them, and what makes them scared.

Follow their lead as you answer their questions about cremation. Give them only as much information as they want to know. If they have more questions, they will probably ask - especially if you've shown them that you are someone who will answer their 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 ri-'tort). 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.

Adapted by "Helping Children Understand Cremation" by Alan Wolfelt



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 2-3 hours.

After the cremation, the remains are collected in a metal tray. At this point the remains are small pieces of bone. To further reduce them, the remains are placed in a processor and refined down to the consistency of coarse sand.

The white or grayish remains, often called ashes or cremated remains are then sealed in a transparent plastic bag along with an identification tag. The bag weighs about 5 lbs. and is similar in size to a 5 lb bag of sugar. Often the family requests that the cremated remains be placed in an urn, which can then be buried, placed in a columbarium (which is a special above-ground structure at a cemetery), taken home, or transported 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 they will understand. This depends not only on the child's age, but also their developmental level, their personality and 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 before withholding all information about cremation from children. Some would say that cremation is too violent a process to explain to your 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 imagination can conjure up explanations much scarier than reality.

Also, be careful about using euphemisms or even fibbing to 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 them are all talking about something called cremation or ashes, they may well become more confused and upset than they would have been if a compassionate adult gently told them the truth.

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2231 Lakeside Dr. Bannockburn, IL 60015

(847)236-9300 info@willowhouse.org



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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 the body except for 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 bone. The ashes are put in a clean 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 or feel anything anymore.
- The people doing the cremation take it very seriously and handle the body with a lot of respect. Just like you do, they understand that your person who died was a unique, special person, who deserves to leave this world with dignity.

Include the Child and You'll be Helping them Heal

Children who are included in funeral planning are encouraged to view the body (if culturally appropriate), attend the funeral, and are compassionately guided through all these steps to be best prepared to begin their journey towards healing. Including the child also means helping them understand cremation if they let you know they are curious.

Remember that any child old enough to love is old enough to mourn. Children who mourn need our honesty, our love, and our acceptance of their many thoughts, feelings, questions, and concerns if they are to heal.



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