



Preparing our child's funeral

A nationwide organisation of bereaved parents and their families



PREPARING OUR CHILD'S FUNERAL

The death of our child will usually be the most distressing event that has happened to our family and, perhaps, the first time that we have been involved in arranging a funeral. Some of us look back at this time and wish that we had known, then, the choices available to us; with hindsight, we might have done things differently. Planning the funeral service can become the final act of caring for our child, and will enable us to feel we have some element of control in our lives.

This leaflet is not a detailed list of choices, but some suggestions to think over, and then discuss, if we want to, with family, friends, other people important to our child, and with the funeral director. It is written to help us consider something none of us ever expected to have to arrange - the funeral of our child. It is also intended to encourage us to think about different ways of preparing the funeral so that it will have a lasting significance for ourselves and our family in saying farewell to our son or daughter. We should take as much time as we need over making these choices, without feeling hurried or under pressure: the decisions we make now will be with us for ever.

Having decided which funeral director is to carry out our child's funeral, the first choice we will have to make is between burial and cremation. Burials can now be in places other than a churchyard or public cemetery, but there may be local regulations about this. Following cremation, ashes may be dispersed at the crematorium, but also in other places such as the garden, countryside, or the sea. Some of us choose to have an urn containing our child's ashes buried in a small plot in a churchyard (if that is permitted) or in a public cemetery. Ashes can be kept at home for as long as we wish; there is no need for an immediate decision. If the ashes are to be scattered at the cemetery, we need to know the options for a permanent memorial for our child there; for example, an insertion in the Book of Memory, a plaque on a bench, a kerbstone in the garden. The funeral director should be able to give us time to consider these choices - or may suggest that we call again.

We may then want to choose how our child is dressed, and whether this is something we want to do ourselves (with help), or would prefer others to do for us. If the funeral director is doing this, it will be helpful to give him or her a photograph of our child which clearly shows their hair-style. We may wish to have a permanent record of this time; we (or the funeral director) can take photographs, a lock of hair and possibly a baby's hand- or foot-print.

There is the question of whether we want to see our child at the funeral parlour, and whether others would too. This can be helpful in accepting the reality of what has happened, though it is not everybody's choice. We may, where appropriate, want to place one of our child's favourite possessions or a message in the coffin, or our other children or the grandparents may wish to do so; this can be arranged with the funeral director. If family and friends want to see our child, they should be told of any significant change in his or her appearance. We may choose to have the coffin resting at home in the days before the funeral; this can provide some comfort that he or she is in our care until we say goodbye.

Our other children, even the younger ones, can be encouraged to take part in the discussions and arrangements; this will be helpful to them in their grieving, both now and later on. We will want to talk to them about whether they are to be present at the funeral, and whether they would like to participate in it.

We can plan the funeral that we want for our child, and the time to be given to it. Crematoria generally allocate 20- or 30-minute sessions for a service, but the funeral director can book two or more if needed. Forms of service, both religious and non-religious, can be made available to us by our funeral director. A religious funeral can be conducted by our own clergyman or woman; if we do not have one, the funeral director can contact one for us. We may feel it appropriate to ask an officiant of the British Humanist Association to lead the funeral. People who have been important in our child's life may be invited to officiate; this could be a friend, a teacher, a leader in a voluntary service or our child's employer. A non-religious funeral in a crematorium chapel or at the family home can be followed by burial or cremation. We can arrange a memorial or thanksgiving occasion to take place at a later date, giving ourselves more time to consider a fitting tribute to our child.

Music and readings can be of our own choice, to reflect our child's interests and personality. We will need to check if a sound-system is available and who will operate it. Service sheets can be printed for use on the day, to be kept afterwards. Sometimes the vicar (or other leader) will provide a transcript of the address if asked. We may also wish to record the funeral service: sometimes our distress during the actual event may hinder us from taking away a clear memory of the farewell to our child, and a recording could be a unique solace afterwards.

We may like to suggest members of the family, or friends, as coffin bearers, or we may wish to do this ourselves. If bearing the coffin is too difficult, acting as an escort is an alternative, or holding a cord. At the crematorium, for some people it is helpful in accepting the painful reality of what has happened if the

coffin disappears from sight before the conclusion of the service; for others this is too traumatic, and we can arrange to leave the chapel while the coffin is still present.

Flowers offer an opportunity for those present to become participants, rather than spectators. We may suggest that people bring a flower from their own garden, or a single flower from a florist, to contribute at a particular moment; or we may provide a flower for those present at the service, either to contribute or perhaps to take home with them. Some of us prefer to have flowers only from the close family, and ask others to give a donation to charity instead.

Funeral directors can organise newspaper announcements, though we will want to agree the wording with them. If asked, they will list the names of those attending the funeral; supply cards for people to fill in; collect, and give to us later, the cards accompanying the flowers; and receive cheques to forward the final sum to our chosen charity.

We, or someone on our behalf, should ask for an itemised estimate of the cost of the funeral. The funeral director should tell us that, if we are receiving certain allowances or benefits, we may seek help from the Social Fund. If so, it would be wise to ask the Benefits Agency for advice before making any funeral arrangements. Their booklet is called *What to do after a death: a guide to the procedure and the help available*.

The reception after the funeral should be what is most comfortable for us. It can be held at the family home, or the house of a relative or friend. Sometimes, a friend will offer to stay at home, to be ready with drinks when everyone arrives. Preparing food can be one way in which relatives and friends can be helpful, but outside caterers can be employed. Alternatively, a booking can be made in a hotel, pub or restaurant. The main speaker at the funeral, if asked, can let people know if there is an open invitation. We may want to be with just the immediate family, or to invite everyone who attended the funeral. It is our choice.

Discussing the possible alternatives for our child's funeral, and making the choices that are necessary, can reduce the feelings of helplessness and loss of control that arise at this time. Our involvement in these decisions, painful as it is, will ultimately help us in mourning the death of our daughter or son.

Talking this over with others who have been through the experience can be very helpful. If you would like to do this, please telephone the National Office of The Compassionate Friends. (the contact details for the national office are giving on the back page of this leaflet)

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