

Explaining Cremation to a Child

When a deceased family member or friend is cremated or already has been cremated, your child may want to know what cremation is. In answering your child's questions about cremation, keep your explanation of what cremation involves simple and easy to understand.

In explaining cremation to your child, avoid using words that may have a frightening connotation such as "fire" and "burn." Instead, in a straightforward manner, tell your child that the deceased body, enclosed in a casket or container, is taken to a place called a crematory where it goes through a special process that reduces it to small particles resembling fine gray or white sand. Be sure to point out that a dead body feels no pain.

Let your child know that these cremated remains are placed in a container called an urn and returned to the family. If cremation has already taken place and the container picked up, you may want to show it to the child. Because children are curious, your child may want to look at the contents.

If your child makes such a request, look at them yourself first so that you can describe what they look like. Share this with your child. Then let the child decide whether to proceed further.

If possible, arrange for a time when you and your child can be with the body before cremation is carried out. If handled correctly, this time can be a positive experience for the child. It can provide an opportunity for the child to say "good-bye" and accept the reality of death.

Depending on the age of your child, you may wish to include him or her in the planning of what will be done with the cremated remains. Before you do this, familiarize yourself with the many types of cremation memorials available. Some of the many options to consider include burying the remains in a family burial plot, interring them in an urn garden that many cemeteries have, or placing the urn in a columbarium niche.

Defined as a recessed compartment, the niche may be an open front protected by glass or a closed front faced with bronze, marble, or granite. (An arrangement of niches is called a columbarium, which may be an entire building, a room, a bank along a corridor, or a series of special indoor alcoves. It also may be part of an outdoor setting such as a garden wall.)

Although your child may not completely understand these or other options for memorialization, being involved in the planning helps establish a sense of comfort and understanding that life goes on even though someone loved has died.

If you incur any difficulties in explaining death or cremation to your child, you may wish to consult a child guidance counselor who specializes in these areas.