

## Communicating effectively when helping parents to organise a funeral for their child

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*'He was very kind and you know, very understanding and sympathetic and said the right things. It's a sort of gift isn't it?'*

## **Communicating Effectively When Helping Parents to Organise a Funeral for Their Child**

Most parents do not expect their child to die before them, and organising a funeral for one's child can be one of the most difficult things a parent can ever be asked to do. Some parents may see the funeral simply as something to be 'got through', whereas others may see it as a key moment in the grieving process. However the parents view the funeral, the communication that they have with funeral professionals during this time can make a real difference to their grieving experience.

We conducted a study, supported by the True Colours Trust<sup>1</sup>, in which we investigated bereaved parents' experiences of bereavement and the communication that they had had with funeral professionals following the death of their child. We interviewed 24 parents who had lost a child of any age. During the interviews, we asked them about the experience of the loss itself, and the kind of communication they had with professionals. In our analysis of the transcripts of the interviews, we identified examples of effective and less effective communication. In this article, we report some of the key themes that emerged from our study with respect to the communication parents had with funeral professionals.

A key theme that ran through all our interviews was the importance of the ways in which the funeral professionals talked *about* - and *to* - their child, with one parent remembering that 'they were so gentle in the way they talked to her'. The strong bonds between a parent and their child continue after death, and despite knowing that the child is no longer alive, parents commented on how important it had been to see their child's body treated with respect, dignity, and compassion:

They let us know the minute they'd got him and let us know that he was safe and he was with them [...] Even though you know by then it's just your child's body, you still don't want your child to be alone.

The day that he moved him from the bed into the coffin, he rang and said, 'I'm just letting you know, I've just given him a big hug and I've popped him in the coffin and I've tucked him up nicely'.

Not being able to see their child for one last time had had a detrimental effect on the grieving process for some parents. Parents appreciated being given the opportunity to have one last look in the casket, or to be able to take home a lock of their child's hair. Giving parents the opportunity to spend time with their child's body if they wished, and acknowledging the significance of this for the parents, was also important.

The use of time emerged as a key theme throughout our interviews. Parents needed to be given time to make decisions about their child's funeral, and one of the worst things was for them to feel like they were being 'rushed'. They appreciated being given ideas and then being given sufficient time to decide for themselves what they wanted to do, although it was important that the options available to them were presented sensitively. One parent commented that the first funeral director they saw did not present the options to them in a

sensitive way. As they explained, 'It felt like it was like a catalogue thing, like picking out. It felt really like, "This is what you can do" and then it's like, "Well, we don't really want to do any of this really, our child has died"'. Others commented that it was important to be told which decisions were necessary for them to make and which decisions could be made by the funeral professionals. Some parents (but not all) appreciated having had some of the less important decisions taken off their hands. Funeral professionals should be led by the parents in this respect, and allow as much time as needed for the parents to make their decisions.

Some parents commented that they appreciated a sensitivity towards the nature of their bereavement, and an awareness of the fact that losing a child was a very different type of loss to losing a parent or older family member. For example, many parents appreciated having been able to customise the funeral to meet the tastes of their child, and to make the funeral more appropriate for a child rather than an adult. One couple reported how pleased they had been to be able to have flowers in the shape of the Cookie Monster from *Sesame Street*, and to hand out cookies at the funeral, in recognition of how much their deceased son had loved the character. They remembered how the funeral director had carefully put a seatbelt around the box of cookies when transporting them by car, and appreciated such care and attention. Another parent appreciated the fact that the funeral director had gone to collect her son's cloth, which he used to like to rub on his face, and had put it in the coffin, while another remembered how the funeral director offered to have the child's coffin painted with their child's football team's flag. Another parent appreciated the fact that the funeral director had telephoned them to warn them that the black cones to be placed outside the house to block off space for the funeral cars were 'very grim' and to apologise for this. His warning enabled her brother to buy inflatable giraffes, her son's favourite animal, to tape to the cones. Gestures such as these were very strongly appreciated by the parents, and helped them not only to get through, but also to gain some solace from the funeral.

A final point relates to the importance of ashes for many parents. Some of the parents we spoke to had been told that there would not be any ashes because their child had been a very young baby and was too small. They were aware that the ashes would be mostly made up of the coffin, but they were still important as they provided a strong link to their child. For funeral professionals, it is important to sensitively manage parents' expectations, but to be aware that ashes may be very important even if they are not primarily of the child's body.

We can conclude by sharing this quote from a parent, who sums up what effective communication and care meant to her:

It's the empathy. It's trying to get into our shoes to try and understand the situation, and then work around that.

This empathy can be demonstrated by funeral professionals in a number of ways. For the parents we spoke to, it includes: an acknowledgement of the continuing bond between the parent and the child; an acceptance of the fact that parents may not be in the right frame of mind to receive all the necessary information at once, and that they may find it difficult to make decisions; an ability to help parents to shape and customise the funeral in order to meet the tastes of their child; and a willingness to be empathic, to engage in small acts of kindness that make a huge difference to the parents, and to recognise the specific challenges that come with this particular type of loss. While it may be challenging to communicate with parents who have lost a child, good care is remembered and appreciated for years to come, and can have a real impact on the grieving process.

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