

# Living with Grief

Children and Adolescents:  
The Value of the Funeral Service  
and Viewing

By Claire Hudson Jantzen

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## LIVING WITH GRIEF: CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

***If you're old enough to love, you're old enough to grieve.***

This is the most important rule of thumb when asked as a grief counselor/funeral director about children and young people about their involvement in the funeral process. It is in the nature of parenthood to protect our children from all harm. Only foolishness and perversion would allow anything into their lives that is not in their best interest. So it stands to reason that questions be raised about the impact of dying and death on the younger generation. To be sure, the past looks ever more glorious with the passing of years, but, by and large, previous generations accepted death more readily and seemed to find a more natural place for it in their existence. One hundred years ago, one was lucky to reach his first decade without losing a sibling to a now curable or eradicated disease. Dr. Alan Wolfelt (2000)

points out that we are raising a “death-free” generation, people who are reaching their forties without ever having experienced a death in the family. Some of these folks are perhaps grandparents of children they wish to spare the awful reality of death. They feel that they can either handle it or choose which parts to endure and which to ignore. But they inquire about the value of the process to the younger set.

Psychologist Maria Nagy researched one of the first and most comprehensive studies of children’s perceptions of death. Her investigation found that youngsters have three recurring questions: What is death? What makes people die? What happens to people when they die; where do they go? (Grollman, 1990, p. 36)

The time concepts of the young are limited. Death is simply being less alive. Even after the funeral, parents may be shocked by the question, ‘When is Aunt Sara coming back?’ Although the child may not fully understand your answer, your explanation should be, ‘Aunt Sara cannot come back because she is dead.’ Try to emphasize again and again in words that the youngster can understand that death is *not* a temporary phenomenon. (Grollman, 1990, p. 26, 37)

However, children hear and see repeatedly that death is not final. An element of confusion may arise around

cartoon “resurrections” of Roadrunner, or the minister explaining that Grandpa Sam has “gone to heaven.” When my three year old son’s great grandmother died, we explained to him in the morning that she had gone to heaven to be with Jesus. Later in the afternoon, as we prepared to head to the funeral home for the viewing, I explained that we were going to see Great Grandma. He was quiet until we pulled into the parking lot, when he piped up, “I don’t want to go to heaven!”

Death is not something we can, in fact, hide from children. Their world is full of the natural cycles of existence—birth, living and dying. Perhaps, because we do not live as close to nature as our forbears, we are ill-equipped to notice and teach, but the fact remains that...

...most children do have experiences that are related to death either directly or indirectly. Curiosity about death is part of the normal child's interest in learning more about the world. A goldfish that floats so oddly at the surface of the water is fascinating, but also disturbing. The child's inquiring mind wants to know more, but it also recognizes the implied threat: If a pretty little fish can die, then maybe this could happen to somebody else. The child's discovery of death is often accompanied by some level of anxiety but

also by the elation of having opened a door to one of nature's secrets. (Nagy)

One of the first tasks for a griever of any age is to understand what has happened (Fox). When an adult woman is told by the police officer, "Your husband has died in a motor vehicle accident," she believes this (shock notwithstanding) and does not think of him as being in the last place where she saw him, walking out the door to work, for example. But a child does not automatically make the leap. He needs to *observe* death to understand that it is final. He needs to understand that the body is no longer working, and in exactly what way, so that he doesn't confuse it with being disabled. If we deny children the right to understand by observing, then we force them into emotional isolation, requiring them to deal with death in their immaturity (Fox). Death by violence or suicide adds yet another complicating dimension to the grief of everyone involved. Children may be ill-prepared even to begin to resolve this crisis. And often the still reeling adults in their lives project their

own ambivalent feelings onto the children. “Let the child remember his parent the way he was,” is the oft trumpeted mantra for the bereaved. In the case of the Spencer children, who arrived home from school only to find their parents dead; the last images they have are of Mom lying still and unresponsive on the kitchen floor, Dad in the hallway, and “there is red paint everywhere.” Had the families permitted the bodies to be embalmed and viewed, the children could have been given the option of having a better “last” memory. As it stands, their most graphic and final memory is the one they inadvertently received in the discovery. Of course the murder/suicide was horrific; it unfortunately pitted the family of the perpetrator against that of the victim, with the children caught in between.

Tim Hunter stunned his family by hanging himself in his parents’ basement. He was a husband and father to three little girls who were shielded from the experience of seeing their father at the viewing. They were not permitted to experience what the adults did; their Mommy

did not stand up to Grandma, who was so angry with her son's decision and his choice of location. Megan tried in vain to be allowed in to the room, obviously aware that the grownups were privy to something she was not. When the DVD tribute began and the pictures of her precious daddy flashed on the screen, dear Megan began sobbing uncontrollably. We will never be certain exactly what she was thinking or feeling, but what is clear is that Daddy was not with her and that the memories stimulated by the pictures created deep anxiety and grief within her. She will need lots of support in the months and years ahead, and especially clarification and compassionate explanation of her father's decision as it relates to her.

“Youngsters cannot and should not be spared knowledge about death. When death occurs within or close to a family, no amount of caution and secrecy can hide from the children the feeling that something important and threatening has occurred. They cannot avoid being affected by the atmosphere of grief and solemnity. All the emotional reactions that youngsters are likely to have to a death in the family—sorrow and loneliness, anger and rejection, guilt, anxiety about the future, and the conviction that nothing is

certain or stable any more—may be considerably lessened if they feel that they know what is going on and that you are not trying to hide things from them (Grollman, 1990).

### ***Children want and have the capacity to care***

At the funeral of Darrel Cooper, the most amazing thing happened. Several of the grandchildren (6 of them, aged 4-10) had stuffed toy animals which had been given to them for the funeral service. As the casket was closed and brought to the middle of the family room just prior to entering the chapel, I heard a child announce to others that rabbit was crying. So is monkey, called another; mine's crying, too, said a third. Each had a tissue and was wiping the "tears" of his/her respective stuffed toy. They were simply copying the adults in the room. Children need to care and care they did.

None of this may have happened had some discussion not preceded in the arrangement office. Darrel had suffered for 6 months from cancer and had gone from a respectable 180 pounds, to about 110; he looked rather gaunt, a fraction of the man he'd been.

Doug wanted to see his dad again and was quite clear on that in the consultation. But Darrel's widow, Grace, was rather uneasy about this, not sure whether she should or not. Darrel had made his wishes known to the family: "I want to be cremated and I don't want anyone to see me like this." Doug had told him, "Dad, we'll cremate you, but you have no say in anything else. We, the living, need certain things to close this chapter of our lives and to say goodbye to you."

As we discussed this, I pursued my three goals—goals which are always achievable for the compassionate director. First, I listened to what the family wanted. Second, I educated if possible, and third, I made it clear that I would follow their wishes.

Having heard what they wanted, I began to educate them, to discuss some of the things they may not have thought about. "Are there any grandchildren?" "Yes, but we don't want them to see their Papa like this." "I understand that you are interested in protecting your children. This is a noble thing for a parent to do.

However, what is it that we protect our children from? Not from the truth, but from harm. Isn't that what you want? What happens if Papa simply disappears? How will you deal with the fallout from that?"

I continued to explain that children, due to the fertility of their imaginations, will make up a story about what happened to Papa (as they do about everything in their lives with which they are attempting to come to grips). Death will become intertwined with disappearance. If Dolly is lost, Dolly must have died. If the dog runs away, the dog is now dead. That's what happened to Papa. The problem with prohibiting the children from experiencing the death of their Grandpa is that the story is inaccessible to the parents, because the children won't be able to explain it. But if the children are viewed as **little people**, are given the choice (with explanation as to what they will encounter) and are then accompanied into the presence of the deceased, the experience is open to the parent who knows exactly what the youngsters are seeing. As observations and

comments are made about the deceased, affirmation and correction are possible. “No, Papa is not sleeping, he’s dead.” “May I touch him?” “Yes, you may.” “He’s cold, Daddy. Why is Papa cold?” “Because his body is not working anymore; that’s what death is. Feel Daddy’s hands? Aren’t they warm? That’s because Daddy’s body is working and the blood is flowing through me to keep me warm. Papa’s blood isn’t flowing anymore to keep him warm. Papa has died.” “Can I give him my blankey?” “He doesn’t really need it, because he can’t feel cold and warmth anymore, but if you would like to give him your blankey, you may.”

In this way, the child experiences the death of his loved one in the loving presence of the one person with whom he has the strongest bond, his parent (or guardian), who can control any disinformation and misconception, and affirm the love that naturally pours out of the child’s heart. It is all about choice. Within the safety of the parent/child bond they experience the death, the body and the grief within arms’ reach. Now everyone

knows what they've seen and heard and corrections and adjustments can be made. Children don't need to experience the *whole* truth, but definitely, nothing *but* the truth.

Often parents are afraid of grieving in front of their children. They feel that it is unhealthy for them to see their parents as weak, so they would rather shield them from their own deep emotion. But the opposite is true. The children I witnessed today were full of love. Having seen the grownups' freedom to weep, they were paying attention to the tears. They did the most natural thing, they cared and tended to their parents' tears through the animals.

As the service ended and I led the family out, Jared was carrying little Samantha on his arm. The tears were flowing freely down his face. The child had the most tender of looks on her face, her eyes sought his, her hands stroked his cheeks and with the tissue in her hand she dabbed the corners of his eyes. *This is good grief.* This is good modeling of good grief. These

children were given the gift that the parents had taken for themselves—the gift of seeing their deceased loved one and having the freedom to emote in safety. Having thus observed the pain and sorrow of their parents, they were permitted, in safety, and without judgment, not only to grieve, but to tend to others' hurting hearts and to wipe away the tears.

There are many resources available which help parents and guardians understand the developmental abilities of children to grasp the concept of dying and death (see attached list). The most significant truth with which a loving parent must wrestle is this: "What kind of story will my child make up about the death experience if he is prohibited from participating?" Whether or not he does, he will create a tale in his mind. It is common knowledge that children have fertile imaginations; they create imaginary friends and provide us with the most fantastic explanations as to what has occurred in their day. Remember how long it took Charlie Babbitt to understand that Raymond was talking about *himself*

when he used the words, “Rain man?” I was 20 years old when I first realized that the position behind the batter was not the “bat-catcher” but the “back catcher.” I had, as a very young child, observed a batter lose his grip on the bat which the fellow with the big mitt happened to grab. He was now the “bat-catcher,” of course. And once the child has made up a story, how can I know what that story is? She can’t explain it to me, can she? It is simply there, locked into her mind until such a time as it’s ready to be released.

### ***Where did the candles go?***

Three year old Alex came with Mommy for a counseling session. As the car approached the funeral home he realized he was coming to where he’d last seen Daddy and became increasingly excited. Upon entering the home I greeted them, but Alex ignored me, announcing, “I’m going to see Daddy,” making a bee line for the viewing room and straight to the now empty space where the casket had been and stood next to the unlit

candelabra. “Where did the candle go?” It is most fortunate that his family had permitted Alex to “say goodbye” to Daddy. Imagine how difficult it would have been had he not seen Daddy’s body. As it is, Daddy should have been where he last saw him. That is what is fixed in his mind. There is now, however a focal point for his understanding of the permanence of Daddy’s departure. His mom can remind him of what they saw together, that Daddy was dead, not moving and unable to speak to him or get out of the casket. Eventually that reality will settle in his heart.

Research shows that children as young as 18 months understand the difference in adults’ intentions, that they can discern when an adult is “unwilling” or “unable” to perform a certain task. Researchers at a lab in Germany performed experiments with young children; they repeatedly dropped a ball just prior to the child’s receiving it, whereupon the child eventually lost interest, concluding that the adult was “unable” to hand over the item. When the researcher made repeated gestures of

being “willing” to hand over the ball, but then withdrew it, the subject child became agitated, looked to its parent for support and made every effort to attain the desired item (*Oh Baby*, The Knowledge Network). We can correctly extrapolate from this that a child can “feel” and/or “understand” the difference between *abandonment*, “willing” departure from its life, or *death*, the “unwilling” departure from its life. If the child’s last memory of her Daddy is, for example, that he left for work, she will conclude, to her dismay, that Daddy has abandoned her, being “unwilling” to come home to her. But if she is permitted to experience Dad in death and have explained to her the difference between dead and alive, then Daddy hasn’t ‘disappeared’ or been unwilling to come home, but rather unable to come home to be with her. This may be an extremely painful experience but it “fits” in her mind that somehow it’s “OK” or different, that Daddy has not, in fact, abandoned her. She can resolve the loss effectively.

## ***Is Grandma Coming to the Reception?***

A funny thing happened at the funeral home. Seven year old Stephen was standing with five year old Markus at the casket of their grandmother, trying to explain that Grandma was dead, that she was not sleeping, was not coming to the lunch afterward and was not going to wake up. But Markus was obviously confused about Grandma's glasses, her reclining posture in a "bed" in her best dress and grew increasingly agitated as the older boy patiently explained what was really going on. Suddenly, Stephen had an inspiration. "Markus, do you remember when we watched the Lion King?" "Yes, I do." "Well, do you remember when Mufasa was attacked by the wildebeests and lay in the brambles? He was breathing hard and finally stopped, and his head fell to the side. Do you remember?" "Yes." "That's dead, Markus." "Ohhhhh!" cried the younger boy," and turning to the other family members in the viewing room, he announced loudly and confidently,

“Grandma’s dead ‘cause she got run over by a herd of wildebeests!”

***Daddy’s in heaven in his underwear!***

When Mr. McHenry died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of 54, his entire family was stunned. He had been the pillar which held the clan together. How would they survive? Would the business falter? What would become of them? In abject grief they planned the funeral, chose the casket, arranged for the viewing, the church service and burial, following family customs to the letter. The eldest son, Chase, rose to the challenge and took the bull by the horns. He would make Pa proud. New suits were purchased for the living and the dead. Flowers were bought and delivered, thousands of flowers. The grownups had a great time mourning their loss. Conspicuously absent were Chase’s young children, aged 8 and 5. “No, the children shouldn’t have to see their grandpa like this—let them remember him as he was.”

Twenty-nine days later, Chase died in his sleep, just 32 years old—died just like his Papa. In unbelievable shock, his poor family carved an identical experience for themselves out of the barely-set emotional concrete of the first devastating funeral. The same casket, the viewing, the same flowers, thousands of flowers, the service and burial and even new suits. “Oh, those poor kids. First their Pa and now their Daddy. This is too much for them. They shouldn’t have to see their poor dead Daddy.”

About three months after the second funeral, eight year old Simon, nestled next to his mother for a bed time story, blurted out, “Daddy’s in heaven in his underwear!” “What did you say?” “I said, ‘Daddy’s in heaven in his underwear!’” “Whatever would make you think to say that, honey?” And then his dear mother heard the tragic story of her son’s last image of his Daddy, the one which all the older folks thought should be his last image, remembering Daddy as he was! Simon had been approaching the house from a

sleepover with Grandma when the ambulance attendants came out of the house with his Daddy on the gurney. They were intent on saving his fast ebbing life and no one noticed the little boy standing in the bushes, seeing Daddy being placed in the ambulance with only his boxers on. That was the last time he laid eyes on his daddy. Of course, if Daddy had gone to heaven like everyone assured him he had, then he had arrived unceremoniously in his boxers.

Poor Mom arrived in my office with a million questions, but the primary one had to do with how to undo the monumental mistake they had inadvertently made, planning a funeral without a thought as to how it would impact the impressionable minds of her children. Thinking she was protecting them, she had in fact ignored their ability to grasp what was happening at their own level, and cheated them of the opportunity to grieve as she had. Together we developed a strategy of damage control, complete with a funeral service for the little ones. When they arrived at the cemetery and young

Simon saw his Daddy's name on the headstone, he threw himself prostrate on the marker and sobbed, "I love you Daddy! I love you Daddy!"

### ***Adolescents and Funerals***

Adolescents in our funeral home spend hours hovering over the bodies of their mates who have perished in automobile accidents or died of overdoses of drugs. It is as if they simply cannot believe their eyes and their hearts. But they are deeply impacted and they draw the obvious conclusions that death does indeed happen to them; that life is short and that they must pay more attention to their relationships and examine the consequences of their actions. In and out of the viewing room they move, inviting, even urging others to come to "see." In tears, with trepidation, they come to see, to experience for themselves the reality of this tragedy. "I've learned something since Joel died," said a tall, strapping young man. "I've got to value my friendships more and treat people like I would on my last day. Life is

so short!” The kids don’t eat much at funerals—they leave the food untouched. Instead, they take the time to fill out the memory cards in the pew racks; the casket is stuffed with flowers, cards and tear-stained notes; they hover and “see.” The tough ones cry, take a second look, hoping against hope that their buddy will get up. “Just kidding!” they’d love to hear once more. But another look convinces them that it’s real after all.

A noted child psychiatrist advises parents to keep the family together, to experience and to explain the death and to permit communication about the death, to facilitate openness and honesty. If the young are permitted to experience the death, followed by “normal” grief in response to death, then death and grief become “normalized” for them (De Maso, *What do I tell my children?*). Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross concurs: You can only share what you know yourself. If death is the end and you are frightened and enraged, that’s what you will pass on to your children. But if death is in some way a

transition and you are comfortable with this, then you can help them (Kubler-Ross, *What do I tell my children?*).

If the child has a relationship with the individual who died, then he or she should gently be invited into the closing chapter of that person's life. We would never close a book without reading the last page of the last chapter. Why would we expect a child or a teenager to do so in the infinitely more significant event of the departure from his or her life of a much loved friend or relative? Let us view children as human beings, albeit, miniatures of ourselves and afford them the same dignity and care as we afford ourselves. Let us guide them through the valley of the shadow of death, leading them gently as a shepherd.

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6. All illustrations come from my experience as Grief  
Counselor and Funeral Director at Springfield  
Funeral Home, Ltd., Kelowna, British Columbia,  
Canada. The names, ages, genders and details  
have been changed to protect the identity of our  
clients.

# Resources List

1. Earl A. Grollman. (1990) Talking About Death. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
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## Suggestions for Including Children and Adolescents in the Funeral Process

1. When and wherever possible, include children in the planning of the ceremony. Invite them into the discussion about meaningful rituals and about the individual himself.
2. Suggest a number of involvement rituals from which they can choose:
  - a. Lighting of candles (being sure to include candles for those not in attendance).
  - b. Placing of a flower on the casket or memorial table. (The Workman family each brought a tool from Grandpa Workman's garage and placed it in a special wooden toolbox he had made.)
  - c. Bringing an item of significance, to them or to the deceased, or which speaks of their relationship to include in the display of memorabilia or to be placed in the casket or urn. (One family of grandchildren bagged up 250 sets of their grandmother's collection of 3700 salt and pepper shaker sets, tied with a ribbon and a note that said, "Joan's last gift to you." These were handed out at the doors as attendees left the service.)
  - d. Releasing of balloons or doves following the service or at the cemetery.
  - e. Writing a short poem, speech or letter which he/she may read or have read for him/her during the celebration service.

3. Allow them to be pallbearers or flower bearers.
4. Hand each child a rose at some point during the ceremony.
5. Permit one or more of them to ride in the coach or the limousine to the cemetery.

The main point is to be sure to see the young ones as able and needing to grieve. Explore with them the nature of the relationship and incorporate their feedback into the planning of the event.

## Biography

Clair H. Jantzen is Grief Counselor and Funeral Director at Springfield Funeral Home in Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada. Over the past ten years he has walked with thousands of grieving families on their journey through loss and is founder and facilitator of “Griefcare” Support Groups. Clair speaks in school classrooms, to business and community groups and is a guest lecturer at Okanagan College and the University of British Columbia (Okanagan) in the Licensed Practical Nursing, Registered Nursing, Human Service Worker and Social Work programs.

With a Master’s degree in counseling, Clair has been a marriage and family counselor since 1985 and was founder and director of Genesis Counseling Center in Manitoba, Canada. Together with his wife, Rachel of 23 years, he has been an entrepreneur and business owner. But his first love is his family with whom he lives in Kelowna, B.C., with two children, Danielle and Warren.





