



***A Guide to
Planning a Funeral
for your Child***



**Paediatric
Palliative care**
NATIONAL ACTION PLAN PROJECT



AUSTRALIAN
FUNERAL
DIRECTORS
ASSOCIATION

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Planning a funeral or memorial for your child is one of the most difficult times in your life. With the help of families who have been through the funeral planning process, those working in funeral care and health professionals we have prepared this booklet to guide and support you as you farewell your child in a way that is special, comforting, and meaningful.

“It will never be okay to have to say goodbye to your child and plan their funeral but when I thought about it as planning their celebration of life – it helped me get through.”

Take your time

Taking the time to think and reflect before decisions are made, is so important. As you begin to plan your child’s funeral or memorial keep in mind that there is no right or wrong way to say goodbye. It needs to be your way and what feels best for you, your child, and your family. There is no need to rush through this process. You are in control, and whenever you feel ready, your funeral director will be there to offer support and answer any questions you may have.

Why have a funeral or memorial?

A funeral or memorial gives family and friends an opportunity to come together to honour the life your child has lived and provides an important place for family and friends to share in their grief.

It may be helpful to think of a funeral or memorial as a gathering to celebrate the unique life of your child and it can be called whatever your family chooses. It is also okay to choose a small or private funeral, or no funeral at all.

What will happen to my child?

Even when death is anticipated it can still come as a shock. Do not be afraid to ask for support. It is important to remember that initially there is no rush. If you are with your child (whether at home, a hospice or hospital) and wish to spend time with them, please do so.

The first person to contact is someone from your usual care team. A doctor or health care professional will provide a Medical Certificate Cause of Death (MCCD). If the death was unexpected, the result of an accident, or within 24 hours of discharge from a hospital a medical practitioner cannot complete the MCCD and the Coroner will be notified. Your funeral director then liaises with coronial staff to arrange the transfer of your child into their care.

Take the time to consider where you would prefer your child to be cared for between now and the day of the funeral or memorial. If you are connected to a palliative care or hospice service, they will be able to support you in arranging a funeral director.

A funeral director will arrange the transfer of your child into their care at a funeral home, can assist with caring for your child at home, or a combination of both as it suits your family.

If you choose to have your child at home, your funeral director and/or palliative care team have the experience to guide you through everything you need to know. From caring for your child, how to keep your child cool, what natural changes will occur in their appearance and any questions you may have.

Your chosen funeral director will also register your child's death with Births, Deaths and Marriages in your State and obtain the death certificate for you.

Choosing a funeral director

Most people have no prior experience in organising a funeral and little knowledge of what to do. It can help to have someone who is experienced to guide you through this process, which is the role of a funeral director.

When choosing a funeral director for you and your child, it is okay to take the time to find the right one. The funeral director you choose will be the one looking after your child (not a third party). Each funeral home offers different services so don't be afraid to ask questions. You need to feel as comfortable with them as possible and if at any stage you become uncomfortable you can ask for your child to be moved to another funeral home.

The Australian Funeral Directors Association (AFDA) can support you in finding a funeral director who will provide a professional, understanding and caring service for you and your child. AFDA requires its funeral director members to honour a strict code of conduct and code of ethics. To find an AFDA member visit www.afda.org.au

What a funeral director can do for you

From the moment you call, your funeral director will make every possible effort to meet the wishes of your family and help guide you through the last moments with your child. The responsibilities of a funeral director include:

- » Arrange all legal requirements such as the death certificate;
- » Bringing your child into their care (or to family or hospice if preferred);
- » Provide care of your child prior to the funeral or memorial;
- » Organise all details of the funeral or memorial including the place of burial or cremation and attend to the burial or cremation on the day.

Initial contact with your funeral director

When you or your palliative care support team first contact a funeral director there are some important questions they will need answered so they can provide the correct information and guidance. They will need to know:

> Your child's name, date of birth and the date they died

> The name and contact details of next of kin/parents/person in charge of making funeral arrangements

> The name and details of the doctor who will be completing the MCCD or Coroners Reference Number

> The place where your child has died to determine access when bringing your child into their care

> What time would you prefer the funeral director to attend (this is *your choice*, there is no rush)

> Do you have any initial questions for the funeral director before going ahead such as expected costs?

> Have you thought about a funeral or memorial for your child and where you might prefer that to be held?

> When would you like to meet to discuss the funeral arrangements (you can take a day or two to prepare)



Meeting with your funeral director

You may like to explore with your social worker or health care team prior to making funeral arrangements if you are eligible for financial funeral support; there are hardship government payments and charity grants available in most States and Territories.

Arranging a funeral takes time, so allow between one and three hours for your first meeting with a funeral director so you have time to discuss ideas and options. Meeting with your funeral director a day or two after your child has died is often preferable as you have had time to prepare questions and think about what you would like for your child. You can meet with them at their offices, at your home or at a location where you feel comfortable.

Together you will discuss where the funeral or memorial will be held as well as the place of burial or cremation, all the details surrounding those choices, and ways to personalise your child's funeral or memorial. Remember that the cost of the funeral does not reflect your love for your child. There are many choices and beautiful traditions, and your funeral director will work with you to organise a funeral or memorial for your child within your budget.

Your funeral director also completes necessary paperwork required by law, such as burial or cremation forms and death registration and there will be some personal information that will be required to complete these.

Most importantly your funeral director would like to hear about your child to gain an understanding of your child's unique personality and the elements you would like or that your child may have requested to include in a funeral or memorial, so they can offer suggestions to help personalise your child's farewell.

Sharing stories and memories, activities your child enjoyed doing, their favourite things, places, music, games, movies, toys, likes and dislikes will help your funeral director plan the funeral or memorial. Some families find reflecting on all the beautiful parts of their child's life helps during this difficult time.

Care of your child before a funeral or memorial

You may wish to be involved in some or all of your child's after death care. Many families find comfort in offering this care to their child, but many also prefer to have this taken care of by the funeral home.

Guided by your comfort level, let your funeral director know if you would like to be part of bathing, dressing, or assisting with preparations of your child's body such as their hairstyle and clothing. You may like to provide your child's favourite shampoo and lotions for a familiar smell. Your funeral director can also organise for you to have keepsakes such as a lock of hair, hand/footprints or moulding and photographs such as parents and child's hands.

Most importantly they will make the necessary arrangements for you to spend time with your child's body. When the funeral or memorial is planned for more than a few days after death, steps need to be taken to slow down the natural process that occurs after someone has died.

This is usually done with cooling of the body or embalming. It is recommended that any embalming be completed as early as possible. Your funeral director can explain these options in more detail.

Not all funeral directors have facilities for embalming so it's important to understand where this care will be completed and by whom if requested. Many parents like to meet the person who will be looking after their child to discuss this special care in person, and this can be easily organised with your funeral director. Remember that you can ask as many questions as you would like about the care of your child.



Preparing for your child's funeral or memorial

Your funeral director will need to have one nominated person to be responsible for the decisions, but if it helps you, there can be a community of people involved in planning and running the funeral.

Involving significant others in the planning process, particularly siblings, can be healing and helpful as they will be experiencing loss in their own unique way. While there is no rule that will suit everyone, siblings are often more capable in approaching a funeral than adults might assume.

Your funeral director, palliative care or hospice support team can help with how you might approach understanding your other children's needs and level of comfort in participating in the funeral and its planning. Often farewell rituals can be uniquely tailored to sibling relationships, such as incorporating special songs, writing letters, drawing on the casket, or leaving a memento in the coffin.

If you have cultural or religious aspects you would like considered, include these in the planning so the requirements can be accommodated. Family difficulties, estrangements and challenges often also need to be considered during

the preparation. At a time of loss and grief, many other emotions are released which can exacerbate reactions and feelings.

Choosing a coffin, urn and keepsakes

Choosing among coffins, urns and keepsakes designed for children is very personal and can be difficult to think about. The law in each State and Territory requires your child to be placed in a coffin (or similar) for the burial or cremation to take place.

Families can provide their own coffin if preferred. Your funeral director will need to check the coffin and a signed indemnity form will be required from the person who has made or is supplying the coffin, as well as the coffin specifications provided in writing, to the place of burial or cremation. You can also choose to decorate the coffin in any way you like for example paint it any colour or decorate with stickers.

If you choose cremation for your child, you may wish to consider selecting a special urn or keepsakes such as cremation jewellery that include your child's ashes, have them transformed into a precious stone or placed in a 'Cami Bear' – where the ashes are placed in a soft teddy. Your funeral director can discuss with you all the different options available, and they are very mindful that for some families cost can be a factor.

Burial or cremation?

Your funeral director can organise a burial at a cemetery or a registered burial site or a cremation at the crematorium of your choice. Determining your child's final resting place is a personal decision involving cultural, religious, or family traditions.

For a burial, there are options at each cemetery to select from such as being able to choose your preferred grave, the different types of monuments or plaques on offer and the different memorial areas, for example there may be lawn areas, natural burial areas, or children's areas. There may be restrictions in the type of memorial you later want to erect or if any other members of the family can be memorialised with your child or close by. If possible, take the time to visit the cemetery and view the memorial areas.

During the burial the coffin is lowered (sometimes by hand using lowering straps or mechanically lowered) into a grave that can be very deep. A headstone, plaque or other type of memorial marker is placed at a later time.

For cremation you still have the option of having a funeral or memorial before or after the cremation. Talk with your funeral director about your options and ask any questions if unsure about the cremation process.

After the cremation your child's ashes will be returned to you in a simple container or an urn of your choosing (not immediately – this can take some days or longer) and you may wish to consider memorialising their ashes by:

- » Creating a memorial with the ashes at your home or on a property.
- » Creating a memorial with the ashes at a cemetery or memorial garden (memorial wall or rose garden or family grave).
- » Scattering the ashes at a significant place (please check any State or Territory rules before scattering or interring ashes in a public place).
- » Placing a portion of the ashes in a keepsake item.

Planning your child's funeral or memorial

There are many different formats for funerals or memorials and what you decide on depends on what you feel you need as a family or what your child may have requested.

Ask yourself if you would prefer a small, private service of close family and friends (where it is not advertised) or a larger gathering (where an open invitation is given for anyone to attend, often advertised in newspapers or on social media). Perhaps a little of both appeals to you.

Some of the most requested formats for a funeral or memorial include:

- » A gathering or service held at your choice of venue, followed immediately by a procession to the place of burial or cremation where words to farewell will take place. The gathering at the burial or cremation location can be private or open to anyone to attend.
- » A service held at your choice of venue with no gathering to follow. The coffin is placed in the hearse and only the funeral directors attend the burial or cremation.
- » The entire service is held in one place for example at a funeral home chapel or other venue. The coffin remains in the chapel/venue and attendees leave the venue first. The funeral directors then attend the cemetery or crematorium at a later time.
- » A service held at the graveside or crematorium.
- » A memorial service is organised when the coffin is not present. A memorial service usually follows a private or non-attended graveside or crematorium service.

A dandelion seed head is shown in the lower-left corner, with several seeds floating away towards the upper-right. The background is a soft, golden, hazy sky, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The seeds are silhouetted against the bright light, creating a delicate, ethereal effect.

“Nothing can truly prepare you for this and nothing you do will ever be enough in the farewell journey but the one thing I think helps me years later is that I put my heart and soul into it and created memories that I can carry with me forever.”

Where can the funeral or memorial be held?

Talk to your funeral director about your ideas and they can help you choose a venue. Funerals can be held in many different venues including:

- » The funeral directors chapel
- » A cemetery/crematorium chapel
- » A church or sacred space
- » At the graveside
- » A private residence or property
- » A garden, riverbank or other outdoor setting
- » A school hall or civic venue
- » A sporting or recreation club
- » At a favourite reception venue
- » A winery, or a historic property
- » A theatre or community hall

If the preferred venue is outdoors you may need to consider hiring equipment such as a marquee, chairs or AV equipment that is not already in place which can add significant costs. You may also need to seek permission to use some public areas for this, and your funeral director can help with this.

Choosing a celebrant

Having a dedicated celebrant to lead your child's funeral or memorial can provide you and your family with the invaluable space needed to be together during this time. The celebrant, handpicked by you, assumes the responsibility of hosting your child's farewell. Your chosen celebrant might be a funeral celebrant, a priest, minister, pastoral support person, or family friend.

Rather than handling the logistical aspects of your child's funeral or memorial the celebrant works with you to bring the words that are spoken, the music that is played and any other elements of the service together in a way that reflects your child and your life as a family. If you choose a celebrant, allow time to meet with them and share details about your child. This way, the celebrant can assist you in planning a service that honours the life of your child.

Making your child's funeral or memorial unique

Incorporating what made your child special into the funeral or memorial will help tell their story and celebrate your child's life. You may like to consider some of the following ideas from families and funeral directors to make it unique.



Music

You usually need 3-4 key pieces of music for the start, during and end of the service. Think beyond traditional hymns and use music that reflects your child's interests such as a favourite TV show, game or movie or perhaps they played an instrument or sang, and you have a recording.



Photo tributes

Include special photos from family and friends in a photo tribute which can be put together by you or your funeral director.



Personalise the coffin

Encourage siblings, family and friends to write messages with markers, add stickers or stencils, drape with your child's favourite blanket or team flag, place special keepsakes, photos, messages or mementos in or on the coffin.



Decorate the venue

Use flowers, plants, balloons and pictures, teddy bears, drawings or letters from siblings. Hand out single stem flowers in your child's favourite colour, petals or sprigs of lavender to place on the coffin.



Use light and scent

Light candles during the service or use aromatherapy candles or incense.



Dress for the occasion

Invite family and friends to dress in your child's favourite colour, favourite team or superhero.



Memory sharing/attendance books

Provide a special book for family and friends to share a favourite story, a quotation or a message for the family or simply provide a memorial book as a keepsake of the day.



Record the day

Organise a professional recording or photographer to take photos as it's often hard to absorb everything on the day. Talk with your funeral director about this service and recommendations.



Select unique readings and share stories

Ask significant people in your child's life to share their memories, read a favourite story, letter or poem.



Mementos

Organise photo cards, bookmarks, seed packets, your child's favourite lollies or another special item.



Organise a butterfly or bird release, or blow bubbles.

Before the day of the funeral or memorial

Between the time of arranging the funeral and the day of the service there are usually quite a few elements to be finalised and provided to the funeral director including:

- » Framed photo to be placed on the coffin or nearby for the service.
- » Music selections provided at least the day before so your funeral director can have everything ready.
- » Photo tributes provided in a format that is compatible with the equipment it will be played on at least the day before the funeral for testing.
- » Funeral stationery, memorial/attendance books or keepsakes for family and friends if providing your own.
- » Nominating a newspaper and providing wording for a funeral notice. Your funeral director can provide help and guidance in putting this together if required.
- » If you would prefer people to make a donation to a cause that is important to your child and your family in lieu of flowers.
- » Advising if you wish to share the funeral details through an online memorial. Social media and online video streaming can be used to share the service via a livestream link and/or photo tributes.
- » Confirming if you have any reserved seating requirements for immediate family and/or extended family and friends for your funeral director to organise 'reserved' signs at the venue.
- » Providing the names of who will be carrying your child's coffin on the day. Not only is this a physical role but also an emotional and symbolic moment so please take some time to make this decision. Your funeral director will guide the 'coffin bearers' on the day of the funeral as to how to lift and carry the coffin as safely as possible.

Last moments with your child

Choosing to spend time with your child in the days before the funeral or memorial is your decision. Sometimes having some quiet moments with your child's body gives the family the opportunity to have some time together, share some private thoughts and reflections, and say anything that feels unsaid. Organising a time for this prior to the funeral also means you have the time you need and don't feel rushed.

The term 'viewing' is often how these visits are referred to and while this sounds formal, it can be a very special and quiet time. Playing music, lighting a candle and talking to your child, giving them a cuddle, reading to them, and allowing space for cultural or religious rituals or ceremonies are some of the ways families can come together.

Special mementos, gifts, photos and personal keepsakes may also be placed with your child, which you can give to your funeral director or place with your child yourself.

"It's okay to feel overwhelmed but leaning on those you love is what helped me get through the tougher aspects of the day."



On the day of the funeral or memorial

If there is anything you are unsure of check with your funeral director. Here are a few questions commonly asked about the day of the funeral or memorial.

How do we get there?

If you do not feel up to driving on the day your funeral director may have vehicles available (likely at an additional cost) or you may prefer to use your own vehicles. It is often recommended that the immediate family arrive approximately 30 minutes before the start of the service, so you are not rushing.

When should I take my seat?

Some people like to be seated early just to have a few moments before the funeral or memorial begins, some families prefer to walk in together just before the service commences, some families choose to greet family and friends – it's up to you.

What if a sibling does not want to attend?

Explaining even the smallest details will help a sibling feel more comfortable attending the funeral or memorial. It helps to involve a sibling in the preparation and on the day. Your funeral director, palliative care or hospice team can often support you in how you talk with your other children about the day.

What happens when the service is over?

At the end of the service, if the coffin is not staying in place at the venue, it will be wheeled or carried from the venue to the hearse. The coffin bearers will be escorting the coffin and the immediate family follow directly behind if you would like to do so, then the funeral staff follow gently behind them.

When you opt for the coffin to remain in place, the funeral staff will usually make their way to the family towards the end to escort them out. Alternatively, you may prefer something less formal and just come out when you are ready. The choice is yours.

When do we depart for the cemetery/crematorium?

Once the coffin is placed inside the hearse the funeral director will then announce that the hearse is about to depart. If the family is attending the burial or accompanying the funeral director to the crematorium it is usual for the immediate family to follow behind the hearse.

What happens to the flowers on the coffin?

Usually, the arrangement on the coffin remains with the coffin for burial or cremation, unless otherwise instructed. Other floral tributes are usually placed on the grave or taken to the crematorium.

What happens at the cemetery?

At the graveside, the funeral director will advise the carrying and lowering of the coffin with your chosen coffin bearers. The family will usually stand together, close to the graveside during the service. At the end of the service, the family will be invited to come forward and place petals, flowers or soil into the grave, followed by other mourners.

What happens at the crematorium chapel?

If you would like to have a service at the crematorium, a chapel is booked at a suitable time for you. There may be an opportunity to carry the coffin in through the front doors of the chapel or the funeral director will organise the placement and invite you to come in when everything is ready.

At the end of the service, the funeral director will signal to crematorium staff when the coffin is to be slowly lowered/moved or curtains are closed (every crematorium is different). If you prefer that the coffin not be lowered/moved or curtains closed, please advise your funeral director before the service commences.

Remember, it is important that you feel comfortable with the timing and the way things are organised on the day.

The wake

Following the funeral or memorial families often organise a time to get together more informally with refreshments, often referred to as 'the wake'. The refreshments can be held at a venue of your preference such as a funeral chapel, your own home or another family home, a special place of significance, a reception venue or restaurant.

Your funeral director can provide options for you to consider so take the time to look at these before you decide. It is also worth considering if you wish to put a time limit on the wake and/or if you can leave at any time if you need to.

What does a funeral or memorial cost?

The overall cost will depend on what you choose and include, what you organise yourself and how many elements are provided by other suppliers and service providers. Make sure you ask for costs associated with each element you would like to include and keep a list of these along the way.

Most funeral directors will offer a cheaper, simple option, often called a 'Direct Cremation' (where there is no funeral or memorial organised by the funeral director). With this option their role is only to assist with the legislative and legal requirements, and they will often offer an 'inclusive fee' for this option which may include the funeral directors' professional services, certificates, basic coffin, cremation fee, mortuary care, viewing and transportation.

Your funeral director is required by law to provide you with a detailed and itemised written estimate of expected costs once they have met with you. Let them know if you have a certain amount you can't exceed so they can plan accordingly and in a way that honours your child while reducing any financial stress. If needed your social worker or palliative care team can also advise of any financial support available.

Estimating your costs

As you have read through this booklet you will have more of an understanding of the options to make your child's funeral or memorial unique. Your choices and costs may include:

- » The funeral directors professional fee – such as transfers, mortuary care, viewings, arranging and carrying out the funeral or memorial service on the day
- » The coffin selected
- » The cemetery or cremation fees
- » Certificate fees: Death certificate costs (issued by Births, Deaths and Marriages) and Cremation Certificate completed by a medical practitioner – if required
- » Any transfer or mileage costs if services are requested out of hours or exceed standard distance
- » Additional vehicles: Family cars/limousines that may be requested to transport the family on the day of the funeral
- » Celebrant (religious or civil)
- » Venue fees and equipment hire such as set-up costs, hire of AV equipment, seating, stage and marquees
- » Flowers/arrangements: coffin, venue and cemetery
- » Advertising: newspaper or other notifications to publish
- » Photo presentations, music purchases or musician costs
- » Funeral stationery such as Order of Service booklets, memorial cards and bookmarks
- » Memorial or attendance book: Some are simple books for those attending to sign as they enter, some contain photos and memories and messages
- » Photographs, filming and/or livestreaming: For professional filming videographers are often booked to ensure this is filmed on multiple cameras and audio is of high standard
- » Candles, photo frames, photo displays, other personal keepsakes you might like to give to those attending
- » Catering/refreshments: Depending on venue, number to be catered for and menu options
- » Services out of normal hours: Funeral directors and cemeteries will have additional fees for a funeral held on a Saturday/Sunday/Public Holiday
- » Urns for cremated remains (ashes), monuments and plaques or memorialisation: While it doesn't have to be decided at this point, you may wish to consider overall costs when planning.

Keep track of your requests and ask for updated estimates as you add these requests, especially if well-meaning family and friends suggest adding different services or supplies. It can get away from you quickly.

After the funeral or memorial

Whilst we have tried to put together a comprehensive information booklet to help you arrange a funeral or memorial for your child, there may be other questions you think of. Consider which person is best to ask – your funeral director, your chosen celebrant, health professionals, family or friends.

Make a list of these questions as they come to you. It is important to have the information you need to make informed decisions at this time.

Grief isn't something that you get through or you get over. If you need support or just someone to talk to in the coming days and months connect with the palliative or hospice team involved in your child's care or you can contact one of the following services:

Griefline www.griefline.org.au	03 9935 7400
Grief Australia www.grief.org.au	1800 642 066
The Bereavement Care Centre www.bereavementcare.com.au	1300 654 556
The Compassionate Friends of Australia www.tcfa.org.au	1300 064 068
Redkite For families whose child died from cancer www.redkite.org.au/support/bereavement-support	1800 733 548
Lifeline	13 11 14



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