

A booklet for bereaved parents whose young child has died suddenly and unexpectedly



*guiding light*

# Choices in Arranging a Child's Funeral



*“ We never expected to bury our own child. We didn’t have a plan, and we had to face it in all our grief. ”*

*Red Nose Grief and Loss was formerly known as SIDS and Kids.*

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# Arranging a child's funeral: your choices

The funeral is the last physical act of caring for your child. It is a time, amid profound grief, when you can acknowledge your child and the meaning your child's life holds for you and your family.

You have many choices in arranging the funeral. Arrangements for children and babies may be quite different from the way adult funerals are conducted. There are few legal requirements in arranging a child's funeral, although your religion or culture may guide you in your choices. Take your time, however.

*“ Arranging our child's funeral ourselves gave us something to do during those dreadful days: it gave us a sense of purpose.”*

*“ We chose a limousine to take us to the funeral so we could all be together as a family. This allowed us time to explain to the children what was going to happen at the funeral, and they were able to ask us questions about anything they didn't understand.”*



# Choosing helpers

There are different ways to organise a funeral. Some families want to do all the organising themselves, while others arrange with a funeral director to guide and support them. You may want to find someone who will spend time getting to know your needs and wishes and helping you arrange the service your way.

You may choose a family member, friend, minister, chaplain or celebrant to conduct your service.

A funeral director is there to help carry out your wishes. Ask him or her about such matters as viewing. Is more than one viewing possible? Is an appointment really necessary? Do they routinely use makeup? Many parents have been unhappy to find that makeup has been used on their child without their permission. You can then decide if this funeral company can provide what you really want.

Family and friends may want to protect you by taking arrangements out of your hands. But in the end, the choice must be yours.

*“ I didn’t know whether I should ask. I was too embarrassed to ask for things that I wanted.”*

*“ Someone found a funeral director for us – we didn’t choose him. We were not given any options. It was far too short a time.”*

*“ Lachlan’s funeral was very heavily influenced by our family. Arrangements were taken out of our hands and although our ideas were acknowledged, the family ideas had greater influence. Later, it felt wrong for us.”*

“ I would have loved to have brought Andrew home. My family thought that the children were traumatised enough and I just shouldn't do it. So the children held him at the funeral parlour – they all said this was a very special, important time.”

“ The priest spent a couple of hours with us and we planned the service the way we wanted it. He visited us for months afterwards. We had an open casket in another room at the church so that people could see her. There were some people who would not have wanted to see her so, for their sake, we didn't have the opened casket in the church.”

“ As a grandmother I was tempted to shield my daughter from the pain. But as a mother I knew she deserved the right to do what she wanted, as this was her last time to do anything for her child. I guess I knew I had the future to help my child. My child had only this time to do anything for her daughter.”



# To bury or cremate

This may determine the final resting place for your child. If you choose to bury your child, the burial must take place in an approved burial ground/cemetery. While you may carry your child in your own car, State government regulations state that your child's body must be placed in a closed coffin or casket before entering the cemetery grounds.

“ We chose a country cemetery, where we found a plot which we thought was just right. It was near another baby 5 ½ months old, whose grave was covered with petunias. The grave was dug by the cemetery. We had friends to help us lower the coffin. My husband lovingly made a unique headstone which he designed with koalas and stars on it.”

“ We chose to cremate Lachlan. Then we brought his ashes home and we have him with us always, in his garden.”

“ The minister talked us out of burying Glenn: he said it would be ‘too hard’ for us to visit the grave. Instead, he recommended the ashes be buried in the church Garden of Memories. Because we thought he knew, we took his advice – and still regret it. It took me five years to find enough courage to go back to the church to ask exactly where the ashes were buried in the Garden. They were so offhand, had no idea where the ashes were, it made me really angry. How could they be so uncaring about my son? When my father died a few years later, I had Glenn’s name included on the plaque. Somehow, it made it much better.”

Some cemeteries are more flexible than others about what they will permit. Some may have special restrictions regarding headstones and what is allowed on the gravesite. They may provide children's sections which, in general, are more comforting than others.

Plots where ashes are buried may have a limited tenure of 25 years. Graves may be perpetual or limited in tenure. If a plot has been prepaid but has not been used, it has limited tenure. Ask for cemetery guidelines about the tenure and fees involved.

*“ We wanted to bury Andrew but couldn't, as we were on transfer to Melbourne. Our only real option was to cremate him and bring him with us.”*

*“ We take flowers to the grave on her birthday. The children have seen it and they talk about it. It's not very pretty, but it's a place to visit.”*

*“ The wording on Andrew's grave is very important to all our family – when we visit the cemetery we always read it aloud. It seems to provide a sense of solidarity for all the children.”*

*“ In the rush, we chose a cemetery that mows down anything we leave on Ryan's grave. Other cemeteries have children's sections where they allow you to leave anything you want on the grave, including little windmills which you can hear as you approach.”*

If you choose to cremate your child's body, there are no restrictions on what you do with the ashes. You might decide to bury the ashes or to scatter them. Or you may want to keep them at home with you.

*“ We've still got the box of ashes on the bookshelf at home. We haven't got around to scattering them yet.”*

*“ We decided to put his ashes under a rose bush at the cemetery because that was somewhere for the children to visit.”*





“ I am having an artist friend carve a wooden capsule in the shape of a gumnut to hold Zoë’s ashes. This way we can always have her as part of our lives.”

“ Now that we have scattered Lachlan’s ashes at our home, he will be with us all the time, but it is very hard to think of ever leaving this house.”



# Spending time with your child

In almost all situations it is possible for you to spend time with your child prior to the funeral. Ask a funeral director to make the necessary arrangements.

In some situations when a child dies suddenly and unexpectedly at home, for example SIDS, his or her body may be cared for at home or at the hospital before autopsy.

The autopsy may be undertaken at a Coronial Services Centre or a regional hospital. Hospital, Coronial Services and funeral service staff understand your need to spend time with your child. They understand that it may be very important to you to see and hold your child and to involve brothers, sisters and other members of the family. It may be possible for you to have your child at home before the funeral.

In writing this section we, as parents, have tried to prepare you for changes you will notice about your child. Although we don't know the circumstances of your child's death, inevitably, there will be changes. Your feelings of love will remain with you, even though your child has died and his or her appearance has changed.

Where a child has died, possibly of SIDS, he or she may appear pale and waxy with a bluish tinge to the lips.

Sometimes, after a child dies, particularly when he or she has died during sleep, the skin may have a purple/blue mottled appearance, resembling bruising. However, this discolouration may have faded by the next time you see them. Body stiffening can set in quickly, approximately 24 hours after a child has died. After this time his or her body may be cold; some parents have described their child as having a doll-like appearance. Dressing or partially dressing your child at this time will be more difficult than before, but is still possible. An autopsy will be performed by a pathologist, or paediatric pathologist (child doctor). Usually, this will result in stitches in the chest and at the back of the head, but the child's face will be untouched. If you do not want to see the stitches, you can ask that a nappy, singlet and



bonnet be put on your child before you dress him or her.

We can assure you that the people at Coronial Services Centres who look after your child will do so with great care and respect.

In some circumstances of death, dressing or partially dressing your child yourself may not be possible, but it is still possible to spend time with your child.

After the autopsy, you will be able to be with your child again as often as you like. This might take place at a funeral parlour, at home, or at a place of your choice. This is often an appropriate time to take some photos if you wish and also to involve your other children.

In cool and moderate climates your child's body may be kept at home in a room without heating for about 36 hours. Partial or full preservation of the body may be required for a longer time at home or in warm weather.

*“A friend rang very late at night and said I could have my baby at home. It was lovely – we had the funeral director bring our baby to us and we took him to the funeral in our car.”*

*“Our other children came to the funeral parlour and put drawings in the coffin; they kissed him and said goodbye. We were terrified going in and seeing this tiny little coffin, but it was something we wanted to do.”*

*“I am sorry I never saw Brendan after he died. I will always wonder what he looked like and wish I had time for another cuddle!”*

*“I had the funeral director come to my house and pick up our baby's bassinet so we could view him in the bassinet.”*

*“We wanted him dressed in particular clothes. I got his denims, his red jumper and beanie: it was better than a silly white bonnet.”*

*“As Thomas had died while we were away on a family holiday, we didn't feel the need to bring him back home, as we had only living memories of him there.”*



## Other children in the family

There are lots of ways in which you can include children in the arrangements for the funeral. Being involved helps both you and them to adjust to your child's death.

If children are going to come to the funeral, it may be helpful to prepare them for what they might see and hear, before, during and after the funeral. For example, you can help them to understand that the people at the funeral express their sadness in different ways and that some of them may be crying and upset.

“ I took Corey, aged 3, to the chapel and cemetery the day before the funeral. What we found hardest was when Haley's coffin was to be covered with dirt. I hadn't explained that to him – I had presumed he would understand.”

“ We explained everything to our children, Joel 4 ½ and Dylan 3 ½. They drew pictures and put them into the casket. Jessica had her toys and teddies in with her. The children saw her at the church and again at the cemetery. We had my father make the casket. He is a carpenter and he lined it beautifully.”

“ We spoke at the funeral and we taped the service. The older boys carried the coffin. This was what they wanted to do: four years on, they both say that despite all the tears, they felt great pride carrying their little brother on their shoulders.”

“ We made decisions on what we thought was best for the children, but now wished we had involved them more.”

Brothers wrote:

“ On the day, my family came in a limo. Then we walked down the middle of all the people and put some flowers on top of his coffin. After the funeral, we had a party. I felt sad. I think



*it was important that me and my friends went.”*

*“ I remember many things at the time of Andrew’s death. One incident which was good for me in a way, but extremely sad, was when I held my baby brother Andrew in my arms for the last time to say goodbye. This was at the funeral parlour.”*

*“ It would have been nice to have had some soft colours around the coffin. We all wrote letters to him, which were buried with him. No one else knows what I wrote – it was just a letter between Andrew and I.”*



# Be led by your heart, not by time

In most cases, time is an issue. If your feeling is to bury your child tomorrow, pursue that instinct, but if you feel you need more time – even two weeks more – this is not unreasonable. You may want time just to be with your child, perhaps to arrange a naming ceremony and to be sure that your plans for your child's funeral are what you would like them to be. With time, you can make choices and change your mind if necessary.

After a child has died you may feel shocked, angry, upset, numb and confused. It can be hard to take in what has happened, what it means to you and your family and what has to be organised. For many families it is the first experience of a death in the family. It can be frightening to think about what needs to be organised. The most important thing that we can say is *take your time – don't rush*. Do what you feel is best for you and your family. The choices you make now for your child are important now and in the future.

“ Thomas died on the Wednesday and we held his service on the Saturday. The three days between his death and the funeral felt like an awfully long time, but this timing was right for us.”

“ Being on holidays, by the time friends had arrived to rescue us, the two of us, in a matter of hours, had decided how we wanted Thomas's funeral. In retrospect, we are glad we had this time alone.”

“ We arranged the funeral for the next day, but we didn't take into account that Alyce's body would not be available for 48 hours. We were disappointed but we decided to go ahead and hold the service without her being there.”



“ I was horrified that anyone would do anything for Zoë apart from us. The funeral director delivered the coffin and later brought Zoë home to us. She lay in her cot at home for three days and our friends and her little friends came and put flowers in the cot.”

“ I did worry a bit about keeping her preserved. People poured in and out of the house with flowers, and children came to look at her in her cot – they were so matter-of-fact about it. In the end, I felt overwhelmed and as if I was entertaining people all the time. An old friend of ours did the service in our garden and we held Zoë in our arms. Some people were a bit upset by this.”

# Arranging the service

## Where will we hold the service?

You may decide to hold the funeral in a place that has special significance for the family: at home, in a church or in a garden. Some people have services at the funeral parlour, the crematorium or the graveside. Your choices are endless.

“Some people were shocked that we held Zoë during the funeral service, while others thought it was a lovely thing to do. I couldn't bear her to be taken away, we loved the garden and the service had to be held there.”

“Andrew's funeral was held in our parish church. While it was a traditional funeral Mass, we chose all the readings and wrote our own prayers. I gave the eulogy. It was very important for Ron and I to be able to share Andrew's short life and death with all our friends who were there. James (Andrew's twin brother) was in a pram beside us – this was very sad, as Andrew's coffin was next to him – but we believed that the twins had always been together and later on, James will know he was there with Andrew.”

“Andrew's older brothers carried out the coffin: “It made you feel sort of proud through all the sadness – carrying his coffin was my last goodbye.”

“Andrew's big sister read a prayer to her brother. We put a lot of time and thought into the Mass booklet and included several photos of Andrew in it, so everyone present took home photos of our little boy. So many people have told us since that they often look at his Mass book and keep it in a special place. It makes us realise just how much our little boy touched so many people, and obviously his short life still does.”





## Choosing the casket

Some people have asked family members or friends to make the coffin. Families are also able to choose linings or coverings or provide their own. Parents may find that the tiny caskets have insufficient room for a child and the toys and mementos they may wish to add.

*“There was enough room for her and for the items each family member had chosen to give.”*

*“The coffin was a really tight fit – we took him out of it when we got him home and had him laying on the bed. We dressed him at home in clothes that we chose and put a lambskin on the bottom of the casket. All of us in the family screwed down the lid and we knew he was in there and that we had done all we could.”*

*“Zoë’s brother Tom painted the coffin with all her favourite things.”*

*“We dressed Lannie (Ellana) as a fairy with a little tiara and wand. We put a number of things with her in the coffin, including her fairy doll and Teddy, a favourite blanket, Noddy, a book, and letters from her brothers, Sam and Jack. I took out Noddy and her blanket before Lannie was cremated so I could keep something precious of her last moments.”*

The size of a casket may be important if it is being placed in a pocket of an adult grave. The pocket can be at the side, head or foot of the grave.

## Transport

There are several options you can consider for transporting your child from Coronial Services and/or on the day of the funeral.

You may prefer to collect your child: that way you are able to use your own car. If a funeral director is collecting your child, he or she will generally use a sedan. If you wish, you may accompany them.

“ It is not necessary to use a hearse: we picked up our daughter from the Coronial Services Centre in our car. We had the casket in the car and we took her to the church.”

“ We had the service in the garden. My husband and I held Zoë in our arms in the car on the way to the crematorium. We had to stop at the gate and put her in the casket.”

## Flowers and alternatives

When choosing flowers, people may have quite different ideas: some prefer masses, while other prefer none. Some parents prefer cut flowers, while others prefer plants for their homes.

Flowers may also be preserved as memories.

“ The flowers which we had preserved and framed were the ones Tim and I bought to place on Andrew’s coffin. The flowers are a symbol of our beautiful little son, Andrew. Something beautiful we can have forever.”

“ I had imagined Brendan’s coffin surrounded with masses of small white carnations. Instead, I accepted a small posy on his tiny casket as a cost alternative. The suggestion being that it was pointless to waste money at a time like this. I often ask myself, ‘When will there be another time when I can indulge myself with my son?’”

“ We put a notice in the paper: Cut flowers only or donations. The last thing I wanted was great wreaths. I would have preferred flowers scattered about rather than in bunches.”

“ We carried our flowers into the church. It looked a bit bleak to start off with but it was lovely when we put them all on his little casket.”



*“We were overwhelmed with flowers ... I would have preferred plants for the garden, as a lasting memorial to Zoë.”*

*“We didn't want formal flowers and asked people to donate money to SIDS research. However, we did ask them to bring flowers from their gardens. I think I wanted them to feel some of my pain as they picked them. They all looked rather sad sitting on the wire racks outside the church but it seemed to symbolise how we felt.”*

*“Our four children all had special trees. On the coffin we had branches of Cootamundra Wattle, which was Glenn's tree. It had just flowered that week.”*

One family requested teddy bears instead of flowers. These were later donated to a children's ward at a local hospital.

## Other ideas

Some families may like to have helium-filled balloons to symbolically release at the funeral for any children attending.

*“We had balloons at the funeral. The children released them and felt an important part of the ceremony, but they were actually far more meaningful for the adults present.”*

Families have suggested:

- Involving the children's friends, to read, to sing, or to play an instrument at the funeral.
- Burning of candles and incense to create an uplifting atmosphere.

There are endless possibilities: the important thing is that you create a service that meets the particular needs of you and your family.



# Creating memories

“ We were never offered footprints or a lock of hair. This will always be a regret.”

“ I have seen a piece of clay with the baby's hand and footprints impressed into it. I wish we had been aware of this possibility, even though we had accepted the offer of ink prints. There was something very lovely in being able to feel the shape of the hands and feet.”

“ I treasure that little book with all the photos.”

“ We have since had another baby and we now wish we had allowed more space on the plaque for the addition of the names of new brothers and sisters.”

“ We taped the entire service. It is our living memento.”

“ As we had a private service, we opened up our house afterwards to friends. We asked our family and friends to write down their memories of Thomas. Our children now love to remember and laugh about these memories when we read 'Tom's Book'.”

“ It was a big blur at the time. We took photographs at the funeral of people who spoke. My father read a letter that our cousin wrote to the baby. We wanted to have a memory of how we said goodbye.”

Some parents find that after time has passed, they have a need to find creative ways of expressing their grief.

“ ...creativity can be expressed in many different ways, and while for some that expression seems to come effortlessly, for others it is a slower, more complicated experience.”



*“ Each time someone significant in my life was expecting a baby, my grief was renewed. Many times I feared ever being able to welcome a new baby with love. For me, quilting was a way to express not only my own pain, anger and frustration, but enabled me to encourage in myself those feelings of love for a new baby. Each time I started a new cot quilt for someone else’s baby, I began the process of realisation and acceptance. Each time I finished a quilt, I knew I would be ready to welcome the child with love.”*

Parents may find themselves painting, sewing or quilting. Others may sit and write about their child. Making a photograph album, compiling all the memories of your baby from family and friends, planting a garden or a tree, preserving some flowers from the funeral, may be part of the expression of your grief and love.



## Legal requirements

There are several forms you'll need to complete before the funeral. These forms, along with advice about funeral arrangements and the accompanying legal procedures, can be obtained from a funeral director or Cemetery Authority.

For more information about funeral arrangements in your state or territory, contact Red Nose Grief and Loss organisation.

## The Death Certificate

The Extract of Death may not be automatically sent to you if your child was under 16 years of age. You can request an Extract be sent to you from the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages. It is free. If your child was 16 years or over, an Extract of Death is automatically sent to the person who completed the legal forms.

A full Death Certificate can be obtained for a fee.

## Payment

The funeral payment usually consists of three costs: the funeral director's service costs, the cemetery and crematorium costs and other miscellaneous costs, like the flowers, the minister or celebrant, the death and funeral notices in the newspaper. When arranging the funeral, be sure that you understand what costs you must pay.

You'll need to pay for the plot by cheque at the crematorium or cemetery on or before the day of the funeral.



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- *To family and friends: you can make a difference*
- *When relationships hurt, too*
- *What about the other kids?*
- *Your child has died: some answers to your questions*

Other publications and literature are available for parents, children, health professionals and others affected by the sudden and unexpected death of a baby or child.

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