

# Funerals following suicide: supporting the school community



**Funerals are important events. They help bereaved students to acknowledge the death, remember the life and say goodbye to the person that they loved or cared about.**

In most cases the funeral will be organised by the family of the deceased student. It is important to clarify and be respectful of the wishes of the family in regards to staff and student attendance. Although students may want to attend, the family may wish for a small, private funeral for family members only. The staff member liaising with the family should determine their wishes and communicate this to the school community.

If student attendance is welcomed by the family, children and adolescents should – in most cases – be allowed to decide if they want to attend. If they are not allowed to attend they may feel that they didn't get closure or a chance to say goodbye. It is best to allow young people to make an informed decision by explaining what a funeral service is, why they are held and what they can expect to happen. This is especially important if they have never before attended a funeral, wake or memorial service. Let them know that it is okay not to attend too. Parents can support their young people in making this decision.

**Parents should be encouraged to take the lead role in the preparation and support of their child/children attending the funeral service.**

The following information will assist in supporting students before, during and after the event, keeping student's safe and ensuring minimal disruption to the school routine.

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## **Things to consider**

### **School involvement in the funeral**

- Will any staff attend? What role will they have at the funeral in supporting students, if any? How will this be communicated with students? It may be fitting for one or more appropriate staff members to attend with the purpose of supervising and supporting students; however some staff may be attending for themselves and managing their own grief. In this situation they should not be expected to support students.

- Students who attend or play a role in the proceedings may require extra support following the funeral. Consider how this will be provided if they return to school immediately following the service.
- Schools may appear to provide an obvious setting for a funeral or memorial service because of their connection to the community and their ability to accommodate a large crowd. However, it is advised that such services not be held on school grounds. This enables the school to focus on maintaining its regular schedule and routine. Using a room in the school can also inextricably connect that space to the death, making it difficult for students to return there for regular classes or activities. Routine assemblies offer the opportunity to acknowledge the grief felt by family and friends.

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## Preparing students for the funeral

- Services vary greatly based upon culture. Find out about the type of service being held so that you can explain what to expect to those attending.
- If it is the first funeral a student has attended help them to prepare in terms of what to wear, what they can expect to happen and how to express condolences to relatives of the deceased.
- It is helpful to describe the funeral process step-by-step to younger children (what they will see, how other people might react, how they might feel). This can help to allay their anxieties about the event.
- Let them know if an open casket is a possibility so that they are prepared to see their friend's body.
- Be clear, direct and honest in explanations—additional surprises and unfamiliar situations can complicate the grieving process.
- It is important to convey that crying or not crying are both okay.

## Transport and attendance

- School staff should know in advance which students are attending the funeral in order to monitor and support students.
- If the funeral is in school hours students attending need parental permission to leave the school grounds.
- Ideally, parents should transport their child to the funeral and remain with them as the primary support during the funeral. This provides the parent with opportunities to observe their child's behaviour and emotional response, and assess the potential need for further support. This is particularly true for younger students who may find aspects of the funeral confusing or upsetting and need a parent nearby for comfort.
- The regular school schedule should remain intact to maintain normality for the school community. Any staff absences due to attendance at the funeral should be covered in the normal manner.
- School staff should be aware of student movements following the funeral. Ideally parents will either return them to school (consider having additional support available) or take them home and stay with them to support them.

Please refer to the **headspace** School Support *Suicide Postvention Toolkit – A Guide for Secondary Schools* for further guidance.

For more information on suicide or support and assistance visit [headspace.org.au/schoolsupport](https://headspace.org.au/schoolsupport) or [headspace.org.au](https://headspace.org.au)

### Acknowledgements

Erbacher, T.A., Singer, J.B. & Poland, S (2015) *Suicide in Schools: A Practitioner's Guide to Multi-level Prevention, Assessment, Intervention, and Postvention*, first edition, New York, Routledge.  
**headspace** School Support Suicide Postvention Toolkit (2012)