

A funeral for your child

- your options and some guidelines

[Gravferdsveiledning – for foreldre som har mistet et lite barn]



*This brochure is intended to serve as
guidance for parents who have lost
a small child and to those professionals who
offer support during the initial period after the death.*



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Note about the translation:

Where appropriate the Norwegian word has been left in the text and enclosed in [brackets]
A suggestion has been made to add references to the SANDS (UK) website and forum in the English version of this
brochure.

Translation into English by Julie and Colin MacKenzie; October, 2009

Photo: André Klemmentsen

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“A funeral for your child: your options and some guidelines [Gravferdsveiledning]” has been prepared by Norwegian SIDS and Stillbirth Society [Landsforeningen uventet barnedød, hereafter known as LUB,] in collaboration with qualified experts and parents who have experienced of losing a young child.

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When a small child dies

When a person loses their child, shock and grief can be so painful that a reaction often sets in so that the person simply wants to escape from pain and deny the truth. The person is trying to protect him or herself from the reality of the situation. Many parents may be scared of holding their child, looking at the baby, and caring for their child. They are afraid that it will be harder to say goodbye. It can help to know that the pain of grief is no different or worse if one chooses to hold one's child and spend time together with it. If the child has died before it is born, then this period provides the parents an opportunity to study their child's features, to be able to touch and hold it.

It is completely natural to try and protect oneself. However, it is important that the decisions you make regarding saying farewell to your child are completely your own. Saying goodbye to your own child is an extremely difficult and lengthy process. It is important to use this time to collect memories of your child and to say goodbye at a pace at which you can keep up, emotionally.

The guidance provided here is intended to assist you in making the right personal decisions. Here, you will find information on what your rights and duties are, how to plan a funeral or cremation, and what your options are for personalizing these arrangements.

"At first I didn't want to see him. I don't think I dared. However, I was persuaded, and I am glad I made that choice."

Saying farewell

Give yourselves plenty of time to say goodbye to your child. It can demand great courage. Just remember that it is still you who are the child's parents, even though the baby is dead. It is still you who has the responsibility for your child. It is up to you to decide how you will spend these final days together with your child.

You can hold your child, kiss and hug it. You can bathe your child yourself, dress it in its own clothes, talk to it, and sing for it. Many parents recall that they were scared to touch their child, and therefore, they avoided contact, but have since regretted that decision. You, yourselves, as parents, must consider what you want to do.

An important part of saying goodbye is collecting memories. This includes taking photographs, making imprints of the baby's hands and feet, keeping a lock of hair, or another memento. Often, you will feel better if you manage to do as much as possible yourselves, organizing preparations and caring for your baby at this period of time and until the day of the funeral or cremation. Try and make sure not to be alone. Have some experienced people around you, who can provide support. Get hospital staff or the chaplain [prest] to help you, if there is anything you can't manage yourself. Usually, it is sufficient that they are there with you, while you bathe and care for your child. Alternatively, a member of the nursing staff can bathe and take care of the child in your presence. Many parents who at first thought they did not have the strength to take care of their own dead child, were eventually grateful that they were persuaded to become involved in this process.

"I was so scared to pick her up in my arms. What if I dropped her or if she felt ice cold?"

If you have other children, it is important that they also have the chance to say goodbye to their sister or brother. Otherwise, they will find it particularly difficult to understand what has happened, express their own grief, and relate to their parents' grief. The worst thing a child experiences is being excluded. Therefore, let them participate, as much as possible, with what you are experiencing and what you are doing. More information on child involvement in bereavement is available in the brochure "When a small child dies"*. This advice should also apply to grandparents, close family members and your friends.

It is possible to take the dead child home. You can have your child at home with you, right up until the funeral / cremation day, or for a single day, or perhaps just for a few hours. Remember, the child must be kept in a cold room. Care and consideration for your baby does not end when the child has died. At home you have the chance to say your farewells at your own pace and in your own way. Rigor mortis diminishes somewhat after death. It normally sets in between two and five hours after death, decreases gradually, and disappears completely after one to three days. Amongst small children, rigor mortis can occur earlier and for a shorter time.

If you decide you want your child to stay at the hospital, you can visit it there. In that case, you need to make arrangements with the staff (chaplain [prest] or nursing staff), who can make provisions for you to visit and be together with your child, during those the days prior to the funeral or cremation.

Naming the child

Even though the baby was stillborn or died shortly afterwards, it is important that it be given a name. It will be easier to relate to the child if it has a name, and it helps give the baby its own identity. Many parents have thought of a name for their child during pregnancy. Some parents think they should save this name for another child. However, parents admitted later they found it impossible to give that name to a new child. Therefore, it is advisable to use the name you thought of, previously.

If you wish to have a church funeral service, the child's name will be recorded in the church registry.

Only living children can be christened or baptized. Nonetheless, it is possible to have a ceremony in connection with naming a dead child. If you wish, then the hospital chaplain can contribute to the ceremony and bless the child. Many parents find this blessing comforting.

"I never thought that a christening would be more than a tradition for me. However, when Sander died, I felt it was so important; and it was extremely right, proper and good to have him blessed by the hospital chaplain"

*Brochures mentioned in the text are available on request from LUB

Creating special memories - photographs, hand and feet imprints

In many hospitals it is routine to make a child's hand and foot imprints as well as take a photograph of the child. If not, you can ask that this be done. We recommend that you take numerous pictures of your child, preferably with your own camera. Also, take pictures of yourself together with your child. You can take pictures of your baby, with and without clothing. It is better to have too many than too few pictures. Remember, you will not have this opportunity, again.

If you find it too difficult to take the photographs yourselves, you can have someone else take them for you (such as a family member, a nurse, the hospital chaplain, or funeral home staff). Then you will have some pictures to keep and look at later, if you wish. It can be a good idea to take some black and white pictures, also, because imperfections are not as visible as in color.

Some wards compile a scrapbook for the child. Staff members write down what has happened to the child and include pictures of the baby. People who visit can write in the book, and parents can note down their thoughts and feelings, should they wish. It is also possible to make your own book. On the funeral or cremation day, a special book can be made available for attendees to sign. It is easy to forget what happened and who was present at times like these, so it can be a good idea to have a book to help you remember and refer to, afterwards.

Autopsy [Obduksjon]

Many are unfamiliar with what is involved with an autopsy, so they adopt a negative view of this type of examination. Autopsies are important in establishing the reason for any death. They are also important because they exclude causes of death or speculation, and provide information as to whether the child died of an illness.

It is normal for a doctor to speak with parents about an autopsy, explain what occurs, and why you should choose to have your child undergo an autopsy. If you wish, the doctor can also provide a more detailed explanation about the treatment of organs in connection with the autopsy.

Also, after the autopsy you may still see your child and care for it. Emphasis is placed on performing these examinations as delicately and as carefully as possible, so that the baby will appear as attractive as possible after the examination.

At most hospitals you will automatically be asked to make an appointment with a doctor to discuss the autopsy results. It normally takes as much as three months to get the results of an autopsy. When you have this appointment with the doctor, you will have an opportunity to discuss the findings of the autopsy and the possible causes of death.

In the case of a death in the hospital, you have the right to refuse an autopsy. However, in the case of the sudden and unexpected death of a child after birth, the police have the right to request a forensic medical examination (equivalent to autopsy). In such cases it is a legal requirement that the next of kin be informed and afforded the opportunity to comment prior to the examination. However, the final decision as to whether an examination is conducted is up to the police. If the police want to conduct an autopsy, then it is normally not possible to refuse. The results of forensic medical examinations are sent to the police, and the police decide to whom the information is made available. In practice, it is generally possible to obtain examination results by asking the doctor who conducted the autopsy or the doctor in charge of the ward where the child was registered. In most cases, however, the doctor will offer to discuss examination results once they are ready.

Preparing the farewell arrangements

When you, as parents, decide how you will say farewell to your child, it is important to take into account your own and each other's feelings. Be aware that it is normal to change one's mind, many times, before making a final decision. Normally, when a person dies, a funeral or cremation is held within eight days. If you wish your child to be cremated, the urn should be buried within six months of death. However, you can apply to the church council [Kirkelig fellesråd] if you wish to postpone the deadline. In other words, you have time to determine which decision is right for you. Immediately after the baby's death, your thoughts will naturally be with the dead child. It is not the time to make practical decisions.

Burying the child in a casket or an urn?

One of the first decisions to be made is whether you wish to bury the child's casket directly in the ground, or if you wish to have a cremation and to bury its ashes in an urn. If you wish a casket burial, the child's casket will be lowered into the ground at the graveyard [gravlund] or churchyard [kirkegård]. In the case of a cremation, the child's casket is incinerated (burnt) in a crematorium. After the ceremony, the ashes are collected in an urn so that they can be buried in the ground at a churchyard, later. The urn is stored at the crematorium or with the church authorities in the municipality [kommunen] where the burial is to take place. If you wish, you may get permission to scattering the ashes. You are required to get permission from the county governor [fylkesmann] in the county [fylke] where you want the ashes to be scattered. Scattering ashes is not part of the Norwegian church ritual.

There are no restrictions on how old a stillborn child must be in order for it to be buried. If you wish, it is possible to bury the child even if it dies very early during the pregnancy.

If you not want to make the funeral or cremation arrangements yourself, the hospital can collaborate with the churchyard authorities to arrange for the stillborn baby to be buried in an anonymous, unmarked grave; and this is normally done with a memorial stone [minnelund], or sometimes, if available, in a special burial place for children. Some hospitals have a power of attorney form [fullmaktsskjema] for parents to sign. This form documents your decisions with respect to burial arrangements. Be sure to ask the staff at the hospital where you have your child, about their standard practices.

Religious or alternative ceremony?

If you do not want a church or religious ceremony, you can make your own arrangements for a farewell ceremony at a chapel, the graveside, or at your own home. You can create tributes and give speeches yourselves, and if you prefer, involve close friends and family. You can also get assistance from a speaker who does funerals [graveferdstaler] from the Norwegian Humanist Association [Human-Etisk Forbund]. The following information generally applies to church ceremonies as well as other types of farewell ceremonies. When there are significant, practical differences between these types of ceremonies, this will be indicated clearly in the text below. **Other cultures and beliefs** The advice in this brochure is based on Norwegian culture and customs. Where church ceremonies and procedures are mentioned, these refer to the practice and regulations of the Norwegian State Church [statskirke], which is Lutheran. However, it is assumed that this information may also be useful to you if you are of another religious persuasion. Some choices

may be confined with respect to different religious beliefs. In other cases, there may be a completely different set of choices and decisions to be made, than those outlined in this brochure.

Using a funeral home [begravelsesbyrå]?

Many people think that they have to contact a funeral home [begravelsesbyrå]. However, it is up to you to decide whether you can manage all the practical arrangements for your child's funeral or cremation yourselves. If you do want help from a funeral home, you do not need to use all the services they offer. You can still decide exactly how much or how little you want to involve the funeral home. Many parents have said that carrying out as many practical funeral arrangements themselves as possible, gave them the feeling that they were able to do something for their child, as well as do something important.

Funeral homes are good at helping with the practicalities that must be arranged. They know what has to be done and can contact the authorities, ensure that all necessary paperwork is handled, take care of applications for financial aid [gravferdsstønad] from the social welfare services office [NAV trygdekontoret], etc. It can be a relief to get this kind of assistance. The funeral home should also be familiar with the options you have, and can advise you on the choices you can make in connection with the funeral or cremation. The home can help you to contact a priest or a speaker for the funeral, and others who might be involved on the day of the ceremony. Many funeral homes also have information about, and can help with, various ceremonies or burial customs associated with other religious beliefs.

"When Line died, it was clear to us that only we and our family should conduct the arrangements for her funeral. Our care for her even after her death was as important to us as caring for her when she was alive."

Other available assistance

As soon as you can, contact a priest, chaplain, or another religious leader (for religious services) and others you may need for assistance. These people can then provide you with a greater degree of cooperation in connection with burial arrangements, and they can support you in your grief. This contact is also important in ensuing discussions you have with people who contribute that day, as you talk about the time and place of ceremonies (See also the following section, "When and where will the arrangements be held?").

The majority of hospital chaplains [sykehusprester] have considerable experience assisting with memorial services for stillborn and young children. So do many local parish priests. Most priests encourage parents to be active in choosing the form and content of the ceremony. Certain requirements have to be fulfilled for the ceremony to be considered a religious one, but there is usually considerable leeway in this regard. Therefore, it is best not to concentrate on what you might have experienced with a normal adult funeral, when you contact the priest for assistance in making the arrangements for your child. Talking to a priest may also prove useful at a difficult time like this, as a priest is generally trained and experienced in handling the bereaved.

If you want assistance from another religious community, the same advice applies. Contact them as soon as possible.

Also, feel free to ask the priest or the officiator at the funeral if it is possible to get a copy of the speech(es), after the ceremony. Many parents have been grateful afterwards that they kept the speech to read later, because it can be difficult to remember what was said, with so much happening on the day of the ceremony.

Practicalities

Below is a summary of the practicalities that need to be organized, either by you or the funeral home.

Death certificate [Dødsattest]

Either you as the parents, or the responsible person at the funeral home should receive the child's death certificate from the hospital. In the case of stillbirths, the hospital issues a confirmation of death that will be given either to you or the funeral home.

Notification of the death [Dødsmelding] (Burial, Cremation or Disposal Certificate)

Well before the funeral or cremation, notification of the death must be sent to the district sheriff or the courthouse [lensmannen or tingretten] in the district where the child died. The sheriff or court will then sign a death certificate which either you or the funeral director must immediately send to the church or graveyard office where the child is to be buried or cremated. This document [dødsmelding] records your wishes, either for a funeral or cremation, and no funeral burial or cremation can take place until this notification of death has been delivered to the authorities.

However, there is no requirement for a death notification in the case of a stillborn child.

If you decide to use the services of a funeral home, the death notification will be handled for you. If you wish to handle the notification yourself, the sheriff or court services [skifteretten] can assist you in writing it. At this time, you are required to take the death certificate [dødsattest] with you. The purpose of a notification of death is to officially inform relevant authorities of the death: and these offices include the court [tingrett], the census rolls [folkeregister], the office of social welfare services [trygdekontor], the parish office [menighetskontor] and churchyard offices [kirkegårdskontor].

When and where will the arrangements be held?

If you wish to hold a religious ceremony, this can be done in the local church or chapel. Many hospitals also have a chapel suitable for memorial services for young children. Non-religious memorials are seldom permitted in churches because the church is considered sacred, a house of God. Similarly, certain chapels may not permit non-Christian ceremonies on their premises. However, crematorium chapels and other public graveyard chapels [including hospital chapels] are available to everyone. You may also choose to hold the ceremony at another venue (for example a community hall), at home, or by the graveside.

In the case of religious ceremonies, you must agree with the priest about the time and place of the memorial. In the case of nonreligious memorials, the time and place must be agreed directly with the crematorium (for cremations) or graveyard office (for burials), as well as with those who will be speaking at the event. Also, remember to make sure that you have chosen a suitable time for the other contributors, including any attending funeral home staff and musicians. If you hire a funeral home, the staff can help you to organize this, as well.

Death announcements [dødsannonse]

Once you have finalized the time and place for the ceremony, you may arrange to place an announcement in the newspaper. This is a good way to publicize the news that you have lost your child and are bereaved. The announcement can include the names of grandparents, aunts and uncles, if you also wish that those who know family members are informed of your loss. Some people also choose to place an announcement after the funeral or cremation has taken place.

Burial place

Some places afford you the possibility of choosing a burial site for your child. If so, it is a good idea to visit the graveyard and see what it looks like before making a decision. If you wish to bury your child in another district than where you currently reside, you can also apply for permission to bury the child there.

Consider your options carefully, as well as what you envision as your future needs, to visit the grave.

Once you have decided where your child's grave should be, you need to inform the graveyard office. The funeral home or church authorities in the region can advise you as regards "your" graveyard office. Make enquiries at the graveyard office to find out what kind documents you require in order to be allocated a burial plot, as this may vary from place to place. If you choose a graveyard without an office, you may contact the local priest or gravedigger for assistance. If you are employing a funeral home, the staff there can help you. One person needs to be appointed the responsible party or "owner" of the grave plot [fester], and you as parents must decide if you will take that responsibility.

"We visited many different graveyards before we were able to make our decisions."

Types of graves

- Traditional graves with a headstone and individual planting. The size of the grave may vary, depending on whether you have chosen an urn or casket grave.
- Graves for children. Some cemeteries have a special area for children's graves. This plot can be used by anyone, regardless of religious affiliation.
- Family plot. If you have a family plot, as a rule the casket or urn can be buried there. The graveyard office can provide you with more information, or the funeral home can help. If you choose a family plot, you can have your child's name engraved on the headstone, together with those of other family members. Also, normally, other family members will be involved in administering and tending the family grave. Some parents may find it difficult to relate to other people and not just their own child, so think through your choices carefully before making a decision. The person who is officially the responsible grave plot-owner [fester] has to grant permission before a casket or urn can be buried on that plot.
- Anonymous graves and memorial sites. Many graveyards or cemeteries have a special area, designated as a memorial site where fetuses and stillborn children may be buried. At anonymous graves and memorial sites like these, parents are not permitted to erect their own headstone; however, the norm is a shared memorial stone. Only staff at the graveyard management office will know exactly where every individual child is buried and generally, this information is not made available to relatives. Nonetheless, parents will still have a memorial plot to visit.
- When parents do not want a grave for their stillborn child or fetus, graveyard authorities will bury the child in an anonymous grave or memorial site (see above). This is done in cooperation with the hospital. Where this is the case, parents will have given power of attorney to the hospital to handle the dead fetus or child.
- Scattering ashes. Permission may be granted by district authorities [fylkesmannen] to scatter the ashes of the child, if this is what the parents want (see also "Burying a casket or an urn?" above). Generally, scattering of the ashes takes place by the sea or in the mountains.

"I felt that I had to have a gravestone as quickly as possible. In hindsight, I recognize that one or two months did not make such a big difference, in relation to the rest of my life. Now, I wish that I had used more time, to look around, and consider other stones."

Memorial or headstone at the grave site

You may place a memorial or a headstone at the grave site, as long as you have not chosen an anonymous or shared memorial site. Normally, a cross or another temporary symbol of your child's grave is placed where the gravestone will later be. That way, you have sufficient time to select the stone you want for your child. The headstone will remain at the grave site, as long as you retain ownership of the grave site. Hence, it is advisable to think carefully about the choice you make. Gravestones can be ordered from a stonemason [steinhugger] or through a funeral home. You also have the option of finding your own stone yourselves, for example, in the countryside. You need to consider that there are practical regulations regarding gravestones, relating to size, shape, material, etc. Additionally, the funeral home, graveyard authorities, or companies that sell gravestones can offer you advice. Many people decide to look around at graveyards, to see what choices others have made. It can often be easier to decide on a gravestone, after actually seeing it, rather than seeing a picture in a brochure.

Writing a farewell letter

Some parents choose to write a letter of tribute to their child; or sometimes they decide on a poem or a song. It may be a good way to express your thoughts, feelings, expectations, hopes and dreams for a future that has been lost.

You may decide to read this letter or poem aloud at the funeral or cremation ceremony; or perhaps you simply wish to place it into the casket. If you find it too difficult to read aloud yourself, then you should ask the priest, funeral officiator, or a good friend to do it for you. Also, the child's brothers or sisters can write something or draw a picture that can also be placed in the casket.

The casket

You can buy a casket from a funeral home. You can order the casket and have it delivered to the hospital chapel or to your own home, or you may choose to pick up the casket directly from the funeral home, yourself. When you decide to place an order, consider the size of the casket, in order to ensure that there is room for the child to have its own blanket, pillow, cuddly soft toys, and anything else that you wish to enclose with the baby. If you make your own burial arrangements, you must notify the graveyard of the size of the casket.

"The other children really wanted Kristian's casket to be yellow, and so we made it yellow".

Laying the child in the casket

You can lay your child in its casket yourselves, or you can request that the hospital staff or someone else either do it with you, or for you. Many parents find it a positive experience to do this, themselves, and with support from a hospital staff member with whom they have had contact. Laying the child in its casket can be done in the ward, in the hospital chapel, or at home, if you have the child with you there.

You have to decide whether your child will be dressed in its own clothes, and which clothes that will be. You must also decide whether your child will have anything else in the casket, as well. You may want the child to lie on its own pillow,

or with its duvet or blanket. Other things parents may place in the casket include cuddly soft toys, or toys or books the child might enjoy, or perhaps a pacifier or a favorite blanket. You should also remember that it might be nice for you to keep some things yourself, to better remember your child by. There may also be other items that you wish to include in the casket (see "writing a farewell letter", above). (Items that are placed in the casket must, according to the burial laws, be biodegradable within a period of 20 years).

Open casket?

Family and close friends can be invited to see, and to say their farewells to the child before the funeral or cremation service takes place. Having the chance to see the dead baby can make it easier for them to relate both to the child, and to you as its parents, afterwards. If brothers, sisters, or other children are to accompany you to an open casket, it is important to prepare them for the event in advance. (Read more on including children at an open casket ceremony in the brochure "Grief in young children" ["Små barns sorg"], which deals with bereavement among young children). You are the ones who decide whether the casket is open or closed during the ceremony. Having an open casket beforehand does not exclude the possibility to having an open casket during the ceremony. The child will be prepared to appear peaceful. The priest or another appropriate person may inform the guests that the child is in an open casket, in order that people attending the ceremony are prepared for this, when they arrive. It always helps to be prepared. Remember to give that special consideration should be made for brothers, sisters, and other children in attendance.

Casket decoration

You can order flowers to decorate the casket yourself, from a florist or through the funeral home. You may either bring the flowers yourself, or arrange that they be delivered to the church or chapel at the appropriate time. You might also want to choose flowers yourself, or let a sibling pick out the flowers, or alternatively, let them draw a picture for their dead brother or sister. Double-sided tape can be used to attach flowers and drawings to the casket.

Transporting the casket

It is the norm to transport a child's casket in the backseat of a regular car. You can drive the car yourself, or have one of your friends or family drive. If you do not wish to be responsible for transporting the casket, you can agree with the funeral home that the casket to be transported in a hearse. If you plan to walk directly to the grave from the service, you may choose to carry the casket yourselves, or ask other friends or family members to do this for you.

Payment

Use of your local church or chapel is free. Sometimes, there is a standard fee to have an organist play. Generally there is no charge for playing psalms. There are some places that require payment for playing above and beyond a few psalms. Unless you are a member, there is a charge if you decide to use a funeral officiator from the Norwegian Humanist Association [Human-Etisk Forbund], and as a point of reference, the price in 2004 was kr 2 300. Additionally, there may be expenses if you want to have a choir or soloist play or sing at the ceremony. You have to investigate these options yourself.

You have the right to a free grave plot for your child in a churchyard or graveyard in the municipality where you live [kommunen]. This is also the case for children who have not been christened or baptized and are therefore not members of the church. You have a twenty year period of grace, when you have the right to a free grave site, and a single grave normally has space for one casket or four urns. After that, you can maintain the right to the grave for a nominal annual fee. Should you wish to reserve a space next to that single grave, thereby creating a double grave

plot, you have to pay a reservation fee. You can get information on fees, regulations, etc., from the church, graveyards office, or funeral home. If your child is buried elsewhere than your local district [kommune], you may also have to pay an extra charge (see also "Burial place", above).

Most districts require that you pay an additional charge for a cremation.

Additionally, you have to calculate the cost of the casket and / or urn, together with any additional costs for decorating the casket, church or chapel decoration, casket transportation, and the headstone. Furthermore, there are charges associated with having an open casket at a chapel (since the funeral home makes these arrangements), designing and printing programs (which you can print yourself, or order from the funeral home), newspaper announcements, and whatever expenses there are for food, drink, and rental of a venue in connection with a memorial gathering after the burial or ceremony. The funeral home should be able to provide you with a cost estimate for the funeral or cremation.

Financial assistance [gravferdsstønad]

The social welfare service office [NAV folketrygden] provides financial support [gravferdsstønad], which covers documented funeral expenses for children under 18 years of age, up to a total of kr 18 744 (the 2009 rate) .This service also applies to stillborn children. The entitlement for financial support includes no stipulations regarding a lower limit for the duration of the pregnancy.

To receive financial support, you have to apply to the social welfare service office [NAV folketrygden] in the district where you live [kommunen]. You may obtain an application form at that office, where you can also get help filling out the form. If you use a funeral home, the staff there will handle this for you.

You or the funeral home must enclose the following documentation with the request:

- the death certificate [dødsattest] or confirmation of the stillbirth from the hospital, and
- documentation for actual funeral expenses.

Allowable expenses include flowers for the funeral ceremony and the cost of the gravestone. Costs for a memorial gathering of family and friends, such as food, drink, rental of a venue, etc., are not considered "allowable" under this system, and are therefore not covered by the social welfare services financial support regulations. The deadline to request financial support is six months after the date of the death.

Funeral or farewell ceremony

During the initial period after the death, many parents believe they want to hold the funeral or farewell ceremony alone, together. They expect the experience to be so personal and painful that they would find it too difficult to share others. Many relatives and friends would gladly provide support, but they are unsure how, or they are afraid to do something wrong. That is why people often avoid direct contact with the parents. However, if you can express what you want from the people around you, you will make it easier for them to show their sympathy and to participate. Letting them take part in the funeral or farewell ceremony affords them the opportunity to better understand just what you have lost. Then, they should be better equipped to support you in the difficult times that lie ahead.

You can personalize the funeral in various ways. For example, you might decide that you alone write the speeches and choose the psalms or songs for the ceremony. You may decide to do this together with the priest, and /or funeral home officiator. The overview, below, provides a list of various possibilities available to you as regards ceremonies for your child.

A public or private ceremony?

Remember that this ceremony provides an opportunity for others to show their sympathy. You will find it easier to encounter others, later, if they have participated in the funeral. Furthermore, friends and family may also have a need to seek and give consolation, because they may also feel a sense of bereavement for the child.

Eulogy / speech

You can write your own tribute, and / or you can participate in writing the memorial speech together with the priest or funeral officiator. If you have written a letter, poem, or song to the child, this can be read either by you (if you can manage it), or by the priest or officiator. It is also possible for other friends or family members to say something, if that is what you wish. You, the child's siblings and close friends and family may wish to include poems, music and songs, as a part of the ceremony.

"Right after he died, we wanted to have the funeral alone. We couldn't manage facing other people. The next day, a friend came to visit. She said she respected our choice, but if we could manage, she really wanted to participate. That is when I understood that it meant a lot for our nearest friends and family to be there to say their farewells".

Songs, psalms, and music

You can make your own selection of songs, psalms (hymns) and any other music for the ceremony. In the case of church services, some psalms must be included. However, it is generally possible to include other songs or music, as well, in connection with memorial gatherings, where there is considerable flexibility regarding choices like these. If you feel that there is a specific song or melody that has significance you in relation to your child, then this is the time to say so. It can be a lullaby, or a children's song that you have sung to your child, or perhaps music that you have on a CD. Most priests will be amenable to special wishes (See the section above, "Other available assistance").

Including the child's brothers and sisters

If you have other children, take them to the funeral (or cremation). You must remember that they are also bereaved, and that it is very important for everyone in the family to be together at a time like this. Furthermore, it is important for children not to feel excluded from their parents' or the family's grief. The same holds true for other children that have had a close relationship with the dead child. You cannot protect a child from grief by excluding him or her. Children can deal with watching adults in grief, and they must be able to participate in order to understand and to express their own grief. Nonetheless, it is very important to prepare children properly for what will take place. You as parents may find it difficult to concentration on anything beyond the funeral, so it may be a good idea to solicit assistance from a close friend or relative, who can take care of the other children during the ceremony. Let the smallest children take a toy, doll or teddy bear with them, or let them have some candy (sweets). This should help them remain calm, and at the same time allow them to be present. (Read more about children's participation in the brochure about grief among small children, "Grief in young children" ["Små barns sorg"]).

Alternative ceremonial customs

A candle-lighting ceremony is a fitting custom which some people choose. The priest or officiator will speak and explain his lighting a candle for the child. Afterwards, all those present light a candle, which is then placed beside the child's casket. In conclusion, the priest or officiator can light a candle for those who were unable to attend. If you have a baptism or christening candle, it can be used as the candle from which all other candles are lit.

Memorial gathering

After the funeral, you may choose to invite guests to a memorial gathering at your home, or at a rented venue. This can be a good way of being together with close family and friends.

"Our three-year-old son guzzled candy and drove his little toy car during his little brother's funeral. It was so good to have him there. Later when he grew older, we understood how important it was for him that he had actually been present at his little brother's funeral."

Afterwards

There are no two people who will experience exactly the same reaction of grief after the loss of a child. Everyone grieves in his or her own way, and one also needs to be allowed to express that grief as an individual, without being constrained by convention, and as to how one is expected to cope. During the period after the ceremony, numerous situations may arise when you do not recognize, or understand your reactions or those of your partner. (See also the brochure "Relationships and grieving after the loss of a child" ["Parforhold og sorg ved tap av barn"]).

Emotions are often intense soon after the death, and a person may even experience a feeling that he or she is losing control. A person may suddenly break out in tears, become angry, or feel so bitter and full of despair, that one is afraid of losing one's mind. Some dream or think that they see or hear their baby. Others feel empty and isolated so that that everything seems unreal. It is possible that days go by where one is incapable of feeling anything, and so some people may also feel ashamed that they are unable to grieve.

If your child has died after a long period of illness, it is also normal to experience a sense of relief. It may come as an extreme shock to experience feelings like these, when one is in the midst of a period of grief. It is also normal to react very rationally around the time of the funeral.

Nearly all parents suffer from a tremendous feeling of guilt at the death of their child. It is normal to look for reasons why the child died. It is common for women to blame themselves, if nobody provides them with a clear reason as to why the child died. One may blame oneself for not being with the child enough, or for harboring negative thoughts about the child. Such emotions may be experienced to a greater or lesser degree. It is a good idea to talk about these feelings with people who know you well, or perhaps with parents who have had the same experiences (See also the section: "talking with others and receiving support", below).

One never really fully recovers from the grief of having lost a child. However, one can get through that grief by working through the pain and allowing yourself time to grieve. In time, the loss will become a memory, a part of your life; a part with which you can live, without that memory casting a long shadow over the rest of your life.

Other's reactions

If you have other children, it is important that you speak to them about what has happened, and what is happening now, and in a language that they can understand. You should not try to shield them from your grief. By being open and honest, yourself, you allow your children to understand the loss they, too, have experienced. They have not only lost a little brother or sister, to whom they may have been very attached, or to whom they had been looking forward. For a while, they have lost the structure, comfort and security of everyday life. Remember that children react differently from adults, and their reactions may surface at a much later date. Often, we think we can protect children by not explaining what has happened. As a rule, considerations of this sort are misguided. Children may rapidly become confused if they do not understand something. They will always notice if you are sad, or if something varies from the norm. (Read more about children's participation and advice about children's bereavement in the brochures, "Grief in young children" ["Små barns sorg"] and "Skolebarn og sorg").

It is not uncommon for awkwardness to develop between friends, family, relations and colleagues at work. Other people may distance themselves from you because they do not know how to relate to you, considering the fact that you have lost your child. Therefore, as soon as you are able, it is important to let your friends, family, and colleagues understand how it feels to experience the tremendous loss of losing a child. Allowing others to see your grief and pain

will facilitate you as well as them in being able to talk naturally about the situation.

It is also easier for others to provide you with support, if you articulate what your needs are. Many parents in your situation have found it helpful to give friends, family, and colleagues the brochure about sudden deaths and how others can help bereaved parents. It is called "Plutselig dødsfall - hvordan kan du hjelpe?"

However, if you do find that people around you have difficulty in relating to your grief, then you should ask them to respect your feelings. They don't need to understand your feelings completely, as long as they accept the naturalness of your personal reaction. By being open, like this, you can maintain a better relationship with each other.

Maternity leave / sick leave

If a child is stillborn after the 26th week of pregnancy, then the mother is entitled to receive six weeks maternity leave with financial support [barselpermisjon], as long as she has worked long enough to acquire the right to maternity leave. This regulation also applies if the child was born alive before the 27th week of pregnancy, even if it died shortly afterwards. Mothers may also waive their right to maternity leave, and instead opt for a one-off payment [engangsstønad]. If, after a stillbirth, a mother has not earned an entitlement to maternity leave, she may still be entitled to the one-off payment [engangstønad] that she would have received had the child been born alive. A father has a right to two weeks of unpaid leave from work in connection with the birth, and he retains that right even if the child is stillborn or dies after the birth.

If the child dies while the mother is on maternity leave (during which time she receives financial support), then the mother or father can (if the father has taken maternity leave) continue to take maternity leave and receive maternity leave benefits [fødselspengen] for up to six weeks of the remainder of that maternity leave.

If the child dies after the maternity leave is over, parents can obtain a note from their own doctor, or from the hospital doctor, which will entitle them to sick pay. This also holds true if the child was stillborn before the 27th week of pregnancy, or under other circumstances where the mother or father, or both of them, are unfit for work.

For more information regarding rules and regulations for sick leave and maternity leave, contact your local social security welfare office [NAV-kontor].

Psychological help

Should you wish to contact a psychologist, you can get financial aid from the social security welfare office [NAV-kontor] in order to go to a psychologist who specializes in clinical psychology. The psychologist must have a public subsidy [driftstilskudd] agreement with a regional healthcare provider [regionale helseforetaket]. To find out whether a psychologist has a public subsidy [driftstilskudd] agreement, you can either ask the psychologist directly, or contact the regional healthcare provider [regionale helseforetaket] where you are registered. To receive financial aid from the social security welfare office for this kind of assistance, you need a letter of reference [henvising] from a doctor. However, even if you do not have a letter of reference from a medical doctor, the social security office may grant financial aid for up to three initial and exploratory sessions with a clinical psychologist.

If the psychologist you go to has a public subsidy [driftstilskudd] agreement with a regional healthcare provider [regionale helseforetaket], this will cover a considerable portion of the fee; but you have to pay the remainder for each session. The psychologist applies for a fixed rate refund for the portion of the fee that is covered directly by the social security welfare office.

Normal health care subsidizes treatment from a psychologist, but you have to pay your share of the fee, up to a set limit. If your expenses exceed that fixed limit, you have the right to apply to the social security welfare office [NAV trygdekontor] for what is called a “free card” [frikort], which entitles you to additional support. Once you have been granted this “free card” or aid [frikort], you will be exempt from paying any more personal shares of the future session fees that year. The card is valid for the remainder of the calendar year in which it is issued.

Should you choose to go to a psychologist without a public subsidy [driftstilskudd] agreement with a regional healthcare provider [regionale helseforetaket] then you will have to pay all the fees yourself.

More information is available from your local social security welfare office, doctor, or psychologist. Also, check the social security welfare homepage, www.nav.no.

Talking with others and receiving support

You may find it beneficial to meet others who have had the same, or a similar experience as you. Some hospitals offer bereavement support groups [sorgstøttegrupper] for parents who have lost a child. You may also find various kinds of support groups or individual support for adults and/ or children. Your regional healthcare organization or family social services welfare office should have an overview of public bereavement support options available in the area where you live. The office may also have a list of other kinds of bereavement support available.

Bereavement support groups [sorgstøttegrupper] or individual support is also available through various volunteer organizations. The Norwegian SIDS and Stillbirth Society [Lansforeningen uventet barnedød, LUB] offers families contact with a volunteer who has lost a child him or herself. In some places LUB also organizes its own bereavement counseling and support groups. To contact the head office of LUB, or receive additional information, call (47) 22 54 52 00.

The Norwegian Organisation for families who have lost a child [Foreningen "Vi som har et barn for lite"] also have bereavement support groups in various parts of the country. This organization is lead by volunteers who have also experienced the loss of a child. You can telephone them at the following number 815 48 501 (answering machine).

There are other organizations that provide support for the bereaved, after a death, and these include the Norwegian Cancer Society [Kreftforeningen]. Your hospital should be able to provide information about local organizations. Also, the Norwegian Association for children with congenital heart disease [Foreningen for hjertesyke barn] can be reached at (47) 22 79 94 50. These organizations specialize in bereavement support after death from cancer or heart diseases.

You can find it comforting to talk with either your hospital chaplain [prest] or priests in general, regardless of your religious affiliation. These people are trained and experienced in speaking with people who suffer bereavement or those who find themselves in a crisis.

Summary of some things you should discuss regarding the funeral arrangements

Are there any older brothers or sisters, close friends or family members, who should see the child before the funeral or cremation?

Should you collect memories of your child, by taking pictures, imprints of its hands and feet, or by taking a lock of the child's hair, or making a memorial book? (These are things with which the hospital staff or others can help you.)

Should the child be dressed in its own clothes in the casket? Should the child be wrapped in its own blanket or bedclothes?

Who should dress the child?

- Will you do it yourselves?
- Will it be done by somebody on the hospital ward staff?
- Can the funeral directors do it?
- Are there other people who can help?

What should the child have with it in the casket?

- Should you include a teddy bear, a pacifier, a flower, a letter, a poem, a picture of you, or a drawing made by a brother or sister? (Remember that items placed in the casket must be biodegradable within a period of 20 years)

Who should lay the child into the casket?

- Will you do it yourselves?
- Will it be done by somebody from the hospital ward staff or chapel?
- Can a staff member from the funeral home do it?
- Are there other people who can help?

Will there be an open casket before the ceremony, to allow close friends and family to say goodbye?

Will you have an open or closed casket during the ceremony?

Will you decorate the casket?

- With flowers that you have picked yourselves, or with flowers from a florist?
- With drawings from the child's brothers or sisters (Remember, these may be attached with double-sided tape)?
- With a picture of the child?

How will the casket be transported?

- Will you use your own car and drive it yourself?
- Will friends or family drive the casket?
- Will the funeral home be responsible for driving the casket?

Where will the child be buried?

- In its own grave?
- In a family grave?
- In an anonymous or shared grave?

Where will the farewell ceremony take place?

- At your own church or chapel?
- At the hospital chapel?
- Or somewhere else? (such as: by the graveside, at a community venue, or at your own home?)

How will the farewell ceremony take place?

- Will the church or chapel be decorated with candles or flowers?
- Will you sing psalms and / or songs?
- Will you have music played? (by a musician, a singer, a choir, a CD, or an organist playing a chosen song)
- Do you wish for everyone present to light a candle for the child? [lystenningsseremoni]

Who will write the eulogy? [minneordet]

- Will you write everything yourselves? Or perhaps write part of it; or write a letter or a poem?
- Will you work on the eulogy together with the priest or officiator, or let him or her compose the eulogy?

Who will conduct the ceremony?

- A priest? (If so, will it be a parish priest, a priest you feel you know, or the hospital chaplain)
- A friend or family member, or someone from the Norwegian Humanist Association? [Human-Etisk Forbund]
- Will you, yourselves, or those closest to you speak?

Who will take part in the funeral or cremation?

- Will it be limited to you and your closest relatives?
- Will you include friends and family?
- Will it be open to anyone who wishes to participate?

Will you place an announcement in the newspaper?**When will the ceremony be held?****Will there be a memorial gathering afterwards?**

You can use this space to note down important names and telephone numbers.

Hospital	tel:
Doctor	tel:
Nurse	tel:
Nurse at the local children's clinic	tel:
Midwife [Jordmoren]	tel:
Psychologist	tel:
Priest [prest]	tel:
Funeral home	tel:
Graveyard office	tel:
Hospital chapel	tel:
The social security welfare office	tel:
The local office of Norwegian directorate for children, youth and family affairs [familievernkontoret]	tel:
The public health services office in your community [kommunale helsetjenesten]	tel:
The Norwegian Humanist Association [Human-Etisk Forbund]	tel:
Others	

Organizations offering support to bereaved

Norwegian SIDS and Stillbirth Society [Landsforeningen uventet barnedød] (www.lub.no) tel: (47) 22 54 52 00

The Norwegian Organisation for families who have lost a child [Foreningen 'Vi som har et barn for lite'] (www.etbarnforlite.no) tel: (47) 81 54 85 01 (answering machine).

Norwegian Association for children with congenital heart disease [Foreningen for hjertesyke barn] (www.ffhb.no) tel: (47) 23 05 80 00

The Norwegian Cancer Society (Kreftforreningen) (www.kreft.no)

Others

Literature

Material that can be ordered from LUB

Brochures (free except for postal charge):

Brochures available in English:

When a small child dies – during pregnancy, at birth or during its first years [Når et lite barn dør]- only available as PDF on www.lub.no

Relationships and grieving after the loss of a child [Parforhold og sorg ved tap av barn]

Grief in young children – information and guidance for parents [Små barns sorg - informasjon og veiledning til foreldre]
(Pedagogisk forum)

Brochures in Norwegian:

Når et lite barn dør – i mors liv, ved fødselen eller i sine første leveår

Gravferdsveiledningen - for foreldre som har mistet et lite barn

Kjære besteforeldre

Parforhold og sorg ved tap av barn

Plutselige dødsfall - hvordan kan du hjelpe?

Nytt svangerskap ved tap av barn

Når barnet dør - en brosjyre for helsestasjonen

Små barns sorg (pedagogisk forum) - informasjon og veiledning til foreldre

Skolebarn og sorg

Ungdom og sorg

Når sorgen rammer en av dine ansatte

Books and other material (in Norwegian):

Det kan ikke være sant - når et lite barn dør. Anne Mia Myhre, 1992, selvbiografi. This is an autobiography.

Krybbedødspermen. Rutiner ved mottak og oppfølging av barns død. En veileder for helsepersonell ved mottak, oppfølging og forebygging av krybbedød og annen barnedød. This is a guide for health workers.

DVD: "Samtale om sorg - ved tap av barn". ("A conversation about grief after the loss of a child" – available with English subtitles)

Smerten, den ubudne gjest. Inger Marie Aase, 1994. Dikt om sorg. This is an anthology of poems.

Pelle og de to hanskene. Kari Vinje and Vivian Zahl Olsen. Bok som forklarer døden på en fin måte for barn. This is a book that helps explain the concept of death to children.

Å miste et barn. Rikke Bjurstrøm 1990. Selvbiografi. This is an autobiography.

Other recommended reading

Summerland – a story about death and hope [Sommerlandet] Eyvind Skeie, 1995., translated into English. An imaginative story about where a child goes after death, a book that is suitable for children and adults alike. (Can be ordered in Norwegian from Luther Forlag at www.lutherforlag.no, the English version can be ordered from internet book stores, i.e. www.amazon.com).



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