

Helping Children Deal with the Loss of a Pet

When children experience loss and death, they have two processes to complete:

The process of grieving and the process of healing. As adults, we have responsibility to help them find ways to do both.

Accepting that the death is real cannot be changed, and life will go on—is the main goal of the grieving process. Pet loss provides the opportunity for children to learn about the reality of death. We need to recognize that our need to protect children from death stems from our own unreconciled fear. This may lead us to make the subject taboo and therefore pass our fears onto our children.

The healing process involves learning how life will go on, and continue while remembering and cherishing the loved one that has died. This involves recognizing our own feelings and not hiding from them. We can share these with children in an age-appropriate way. It is important to provide ample opportunity for children to process their feelings of grief with us throughout the child's life.

Openness is especially important for the first few days, weeks and months after the loss. Reading books that deal with death like “The Ten Good Things About Barney” or “Freddy The Leaf” or preparing a tribute photo album together is a great way to start. Then the book or album can be left in sight and offered to the child periodically as a way of opening the subject.



Talking to children about grief and death:

- ❖ Death is a reality of life.
- ❖ We cannot protect them.
- ❖ Children do not naturally fear death.
- ❖ Our actions and behaviors guide them and teach them.
- ❖ Children need to be reassured about their own security.

Not talking about death (which indicates the subject is off limits) doesn't help a child learn to cope with loss. This must be our goal. When discussing death with children, explanations should be simple and direct. The child should be told the truth using as much detail as she/he can understand. Questions should be answered honestly and directly. The adult should check to make sure the child understands the answer.

Issues to keep in mind as you explain death and grief to children:

- ❖ Be honest.
- ❖ Be prepared to meet resistance, anger, impatience or disinterest.
- ❖ Be real with your own emotions.
- ❖ Respect the age of the child.
- ❖ Be ready for guilt.
- ❖ Don't project your feelings onto the child.
- ❖ Understand the differences in the way children grieve.
- ❖ Know you don't have to “do it perfectly.”

HONESTY

A discussion about death should include proper words such as “cancer,” “died,” and “death.” Substitute words or phrases (passed away, put to sleep, he is sleeping, we lost him) should never be used as they can cause confusion and misunderstandings.

Should children be present at euthanasia?

This is similar to the euthanasia question...only the parent knows the child well enough to answer this question. Children vary in their sensitivity, their resiliency and in their attachment to their pet. All of these factors should be considered when a parent makes this decision. The euthanasia will be an emotional experience and may be too intense for many children. If this is the case, having the opportunity to say goodbye before and after euthanasia might be the wisest approach. An honest, thoughtful explanation should still be given to a child who does not attend the euthanasia.

There are differences in the ways children versus adults mourn:

- ❖ Children do not experience continual and intense emotional and behavioral grief reactions. They may show grief only occasionally and briefly.
- ❖ In reality, a child's grief lasts longer because it must be re-experienced, understood, and re-integrated at each new developmental life phase.
- ❖ This is due to the fact that a child's ability to experience intense emotions is limited because of their limited frame of reference.
- ❖ Children's minds protect them from what is too powerful to handle.
- ❖ Their grieving periods are shortened because they have a built-in ability to process only as much as they can handle. This puts the responsibility on us to provide openings for them to discuss feelings periodically.
- ❖ Feelings may show up in behaviors.

Memorial Services:

When death occurs, children can and should be included in the planning and participation of memorial ceremonies. These events help children say goodbye and give them the opportunity to understand the passage of death in a concrete way. Like adults, children benefit from the sense of closure such a ritual provides.

They should never be forced to participate in any ritual or event, but should be encouraged to participate in those things they feel comfortable with. Often times, resistance stems from fear of the unknown. This may require helping them process fears or concerns prior to attending the service. Open-ended questions give them permission to share their perceptions without apprehension. This also helps them understand discussions about death and open exploration of ALL feelings are normal and not taboo. They should have a complete explanation in advance of what they will see, so there are no surprises. Go over each step with them so they can prepare for it.



Childhood Development

Guide to Understanding Loss

Infants

Babies cannot understand the concept of death, but it is important to remember that they are able to perceive when those around them are upset or depressed. Adults need to keep in mind that infants are quite perceptive and may need additional attention, or comfort during times of loss.

2 to 3 years

Children this age cannot understand the finality of death. They can, however, comprehend that the dead pet cannot feel anything, no longer breathes in and out, can no longer walk around, eat, or go to the bathroom. Young children should be told a pet is dead and will not return. They may not appear to be very sad, because they think the pet is probably coming back. They may ask again and again when their pet will come home. This should be handled patiently with the understanding that the child will gradually come to understand what “forever” means. Again, children of this age understand sadness and you can share “being sad.” Asking for a hug gives the child something helpful to do and helps them understand compassion.

4 to 6 years

Children between 4 and 6 have some understanding of death, but in a way that relates to a continued existence. They may fantasize about the pet’s life “underground,” or in heaven. A return to life may still be part of the child’s expectation, and should be gently, consistently refuted. This is common for children of this age and the next stage is to become fearful that death is contagious. They may fear for their own or other’s death. Manifestations of grief at this point may take the form of bladder or bowel control problems, or eating and sleeping disturbances. The parent should encourage the child to talk about fears and feelings. Several brief discussions are more productive than long sessions.



7 to 9 years

The irreversibility of death becomes real to children this age. They may become very curious about the concrete reality of death and its implications. They are into details: “What happens when you die?” “What does the body look like?” Death is often thought of as a person or spirit, like a skeleton, ghost, or angel.

10 to 12 years

By the time a child is 10, death is known to be unavoidable and is not seen as a punishment. This is the beginning of grasping the concept of mortality. By 12, death is seen as final and something that happens to everyone. In our society, grieving adults may withdraw and not talk to others. Children, however, may ask questions and talk openly about death. They may even ask what appear to be confusing questions: “I know Zero’s dead, but how can he breathe underground?” This is simply their way of testing reality and attempting to make sense of what being dead REALLY means.