



## *How To Help A Child Grieving A Beloved Pet*

The loss of a beloved pet is a major life experience for children and it is often their first introduction to death. The closer the bond and the longer the pet's life, stronger the impact. Pets are a special type of companion for children, often forming the role of a sibling or best friend, so it can be profoundly life-changing and difficult when they leave the family's circle. To help kids feel loved, included, and understood, plenty of affection, patience, and reassurance go a long way for everyone involved.

### *A Truly Formative Experience*

Death presents a vital and deeply meaningful opportunity for children to learn that love and grief go hand-in-hand. How adults support and guide them along this path is truly formative and the lessons they learn about themselves, others, and the world will ripple through the rest of their lives. As with all parenting in a stressful, complex situation, children will look to you as their role model to learn how to mourn, express themselves, and become resilient.

Every individual grieves differently and at their own pace, and while there are familiar patterns, the experience tends to feel like a roller coaster. For example, it is common for children to experience 'grief spurts' where they overtly demonstrate their mourning in smaller bursts compared to adults. Your child will be grateful to have you beside them on this ride. This experience will help to prepare them for new loves and losses, as they will inevitably occur.

With children of different ages, you may want to speak with them separately at first if this is possible. Older children will process information and feelings differently than younger children, and as a result, also express grief differently.

It can take a long while for reality to register – depending on their developmental stage, they may not recognize the significance of the loss or even seem troubled by it at first. Phases of understanding will continue as they mature and revisit the loss.

If you are in a position to anticipate your pet's passing, this may give you the opportunity to plan how to navigate discussions with your child. Keep in mind that your child will be picking up on subtle shifts in how you and other family members, including other animals, are relating to your pet so they may start asking questions sooner than you expect.

### *Questions Kids Tend to Ask*

You may be wondering what to do if your child asks a question that you're uncertain about answering. It's natural to be tempted to make things up or minimize the facts, hoping they'll be satisfied or relieved. Instead, take a deep breath and begin by exploring what they already understand. Then share what you do know or believe, and acknowledge what you don't. It's perfectly fine to respond with something like, "Uhm-hm, I wonder," or "What do you think?" or "Yes, that's a good question. Can I think about it and we'll talk a little later?" If it's too difficult to answer, enlist another adult or professional for help.

**Here are some of the questions you might anticipate:**

What is death? • Is it forever? • Why did s/he die? • Was it my fault? • Where did s/he go? • When is s/he coming back? Will we get to be with her/him again? • Is s/he with God? Or, Is s/he in Heaven? • Can I see her/him? • Can s/he hear us? • Are you going to die? Or, Am I going to die?



- Due to the sensitive nature of pet loss, it's best to explain things openly and truthfully and at the child's developmental level of understanding.
- Use the terms "death," "dying," and "euthanasia" instead of "going away," "passing," "lost," "put to sleep," or "put down" to avoid confusion and fear.
- If the pet is old or visibly sick and declining, point out the changes and diminished quality of life to your child. If needed, state clearly that death means the body has completely stopped working and moving, that it won't start again, and that the pet can no longer feel anything or experience pain.
- Initiate brief exchanges at first to gauge their comfort and understanding of what's happening. Wait to see if they're satisfied with the conversation or still curious.
- The younger the child, the less information they can process, so follow their lead. Avoid giving more detail than they seem to be soliciting.
- Let them know it's okay to ask anything. The answers a child makes up to fill in the blanks might be far worse than reality. With their active imaginations and because it takes time to grasp the experience, they will have lingering questions long after you might expect.
- Help them find words to express themselves. This is done well through reflective listening and modeling. Share your own personal observations, thoughts and feelings, including letting them see you cry. Tears are a physical expression of love. Keep in mind that uncontrollable sobbing may scare them, so try to do that in private.
- Because spiritual, cultural and philosophical beliefs arise with death, you can use this opportunity to teach your children about yours and encourage them to develop their own. One caution: If you tell your child that "God took them because they're special," they are likely to worry about who is going to die next.
- Children can become consumed by intense anger, fear and guilt. These serious episodes can indicate they believe they're somehow responsible for the pet's demise so bring up this possibility for clarification.
- Some healing happens in silence, so give them space and allow discussions to evolve organically.
- During a big life change like pet loss, familiar routines and rules give us bearings, so try to maintain those that you can. Similarly, children also need breaks from their grief; playing with friends, engaging in fun activities, and being silly help them heal.
- Because children tend to replay major life events over and over again, support this healthy inclination as they work through this loss. You will often see aspects of the death manifest in their play, which can provide a very helpful way for you to actively engage in their process.
- Share the important news of the pet's death with the children's other trusted caregivers and their teachers so they can be active supports.
- Young people struggle with differentiating bodily sensations from emotions – they tend to combine their internal states. Grief often manifests directly as both specific and vague behavioral and physical symptoms. These include insomnia, lethargy, irritability, aggression, clinging, avoidance, loss of appetite or overeating, rashes, hair loss, nausea, dizziness or headaches. It can be expressed with regressed habits, such as thumb-sucking, tantrums, biting, incontinence, or rocking. Reflective listening and helping children articulate their feelings can reduce these issues. If they don't resolve quickly, talk with your pediatrician.
- People of all ages benefit from transitional objects, and because a child's distress can manifest especially at night, inviting them to take one of the pet's toys, blankets, or even the collar to bed with them can help them relax and find comfort.
- Keep in mind that if your kids are present for a euthanasia procedure, it is an intense experience so stay flexible. Clearly describe how the pet had been suffering (identify specific signs) and that the vet has the ability to end that suffering in a very humane and gentle way with a couple simple, painless injections. Describing the experience as a final act of kindness can be very reassuring.
- Let the children cuddle their pet before the appointment if they want. If the procedure is done at home or they come to the vet's office with you, they may prefer to be in another room or step outside while it is done. Afterwards, some may benefit from seeing the body to help them better understand death.
- Some kids ask what happens to the body and analogies to other events in nature can be useful. You might explain that the pet's body is like the cocoon of a butterfly or the eggshell from which a bird hatches. If you don't believe in an afterlife, you can compare the body to a leaf dropping from a tree and dissolving into the earth.
- There are many meaningful ways to memorialize a beloved pet. A structured tribute ceremony can help everyone, with family and close friends sharing stories about the pet.