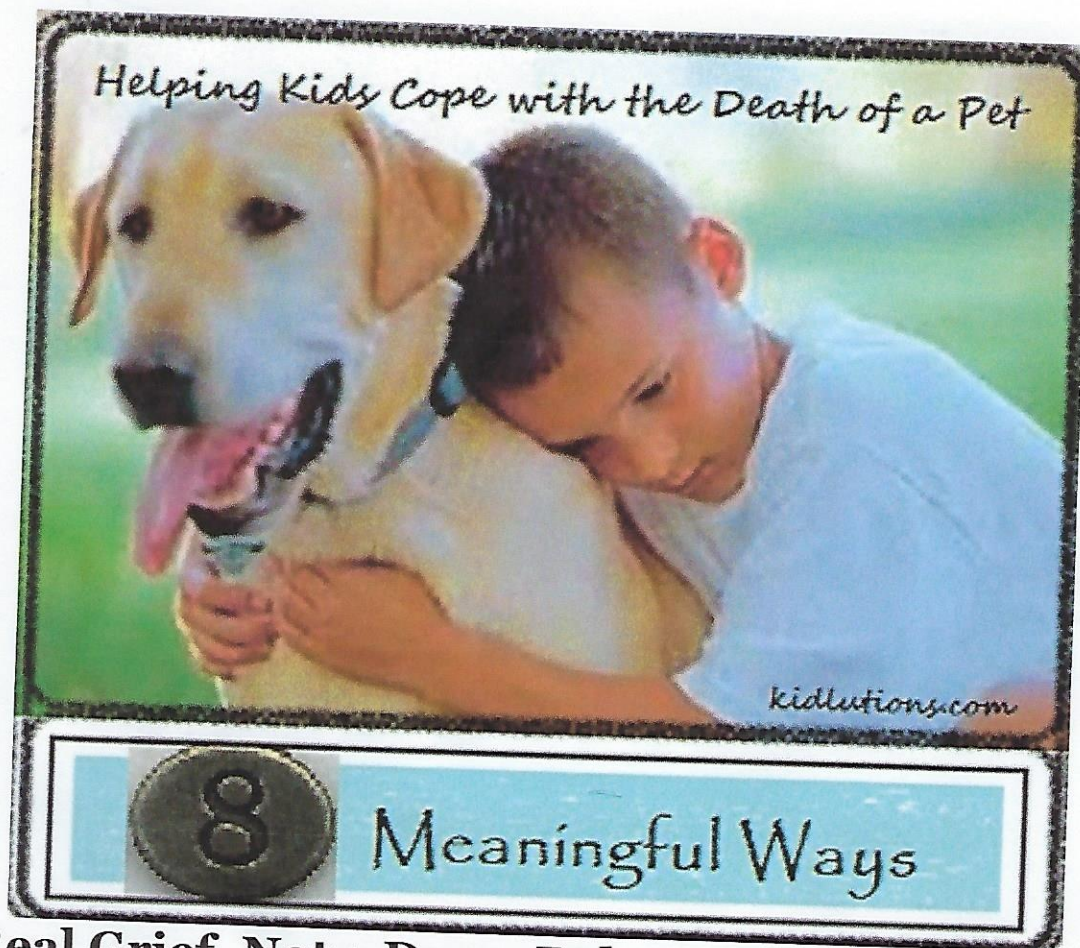


Helping Children Cope with the Death of a Pet



Real Grief, Not a Dress Rehearsal

Pets are a huge part of our families and we develop strong bonds with them. It is no surprise that we grieve their loss very deeply. Whether it is a goldfish, hamster, an iguana, guinea pig, cat, dog or horse, the death of the animal causes real grief (for kids and for adults). It is not a "dress rehearsal" for the real thing.

Grieving Children Have Unique Needs

When it comes to children, there are some unique needs to consider when explaining and helping them cope with it. Depending upon the age of the child, the child may have very different reactions. Parents may feel a double sadness after the death of a pet, as they will grieve the loss of the pet, as well as have to support their child through the loss. It is not an easy task, but there are some things that parents can do to help their child cope.

8 Meaningful Way to Support Your Child

1. Always tell the truth.

When given the truth in an age-appropriate manner, children can cope. The truth is always preferable to saying something like, "Fluffy ran away." Your child will eventually learn the truth and making up "little white lies" can erode your child's trust in you. While it might seem like a kind-hearted thing to do, trying to soften the blow of the death does not help your child. He cannot forever be shielded from the reality of death, and helping him learn to cope with loss is far more important than trying to shield him from the feelings of grief. It provides a much healthier approach.

2. Avoid euphemisms.

When discussing the death of the animal, do not say, "Sam is sleeping, he is peaceful." This may induce a

fear of bedtime in young children. Avoid saying, "We lost Princess." This implies you may find her again.

3. Be patient.

Young children who may need to continue to talk about the pet's death in order to understand it. They may also play the death out with stuffed animals or toys. Do not suggest your child "find something else to do", or play something "nice". It's important *not* to view this kind of play of "macabre". This is how children make sense of the loss, especially in the early days. Use their play content as a springboard for more discussion. Be sure to use "feeling" words. "Your stuffed animal died, just like Sparky. It is SAD when our animals die. I know you miss Sparky very much. I do, too."

4. Support your child in memorializing the pet.

Whether or not you have your beloved pet's body for burial or not, you can find a way to engage your child in a ritual to memorialize the animal. You can find a special area in your yard to perhaps plant a small bush or some flowers and make a marker with you pet's name. Another option would be to have a small resin or plaster garden creature that symbolizes your beloved pet. If you live in an apartment, a small potted plant or just a framed picture of the animal could be used. Allow each family member to say

something special about the pet, something they will miss, and something funny or silly that they remember about the pet.

5. Create a memory box.

Use an old shoebox or other suitable container and have your child decorate the “Memory Box”. Have your child and family members select things that remind them of the pet. Perhaps its collar, a toy that belonged to the pet, pictures of happy times with the pet. Family members can even write little notes or snippets of memories about the pet. When your child or other family members are feeling particularly sad, they can sift through the “Memory Box”.

6. Share your own grief.

Let your child see you grieve. It is helpful for a child to know that you, too, loved and miss the pet. Express to your child that you feel great sadness, but that you also hold many dear memories of the pet. Talk with your child often about the pet.

7. Hug your child.

Always hug your children, but even more so when they have experienced a loss. Children need more TLC when they are grieving. If your child doesn't want to talk about the pet, encourage him to either write or draw about it.