

My Best Friend.....

For many children, their first experience of death is when their pet dies. It is important, that the death of a pet is handled carefully, sensitively and honestly.

Many factors contribute to how a child will feel, react and grieve when their pet dies. These factors are the attachment that a child had with their pet, the circumstances of the pet's death, and previous experiences that involved a loss to the child.

The death of a pet can be very traumatic and confusing for a child, however, they can also be very resilient when they hear the news that their pet is dead, and can often deal with the news far better than we anticipate.

Inquisitive Minds

Being honest with a child, does not mean that it is necessary to discuss the details of a pet's death, although children do have very inquisitive minds and may ask for specific details that parents may not be comfortable answering. It is important to be prepared with honest answers, while maintaining a balance of sensitivity.

Breaking the bad news

The responsibility to tell a child that a pet has died lies firmly with the parents or guardian. Veterinary staff will ensure that if a child is present when breaking the news that a much loved family pet is nearing the end of its life or if a pet is to be euthanised, that they will take the child's feelings into account.

Avoid Euphemisms!

Avoid telling a child that their pet has been 'put to sleep', as some children may believe that one day their pet will wake up. A child may also become afraid of falling asleep for fear that they may not wake up.

Don't make up Stories

Don't make up a story to explain why a pet is no longer there. Saying that the dog ran away or the cat has gone to live with someone else will only confuse a child, and the child may wait for the return of their pet or request to go and visit their pet.

The role of the Vet

Explaining the work the veterinary surgeon has done to help the pet is important, especially with regard to euthanasia, as a child may misinterpret the actions of the vet.

Grieving

It is natural for a parent or guardian to want to protect their child, especially from the emotional pain associated with grieving. However if the situation is not handled correctly the child can have

a distorted view of death, and that can play on their minds for years to come. Children are prone to 'bargaining' at the time and may feel helpless as well as responsible.

Physical reactions

Noticeable changes may be apparent in a child's behaviour and some children may seek more attention from their parents. School work may be neglected and some children may feel physically ill.

They may show signs of regression in some physical aspects of their behaviour that they had 'outgrown', like sucking their thumb, bed wetting or having nightmares.

Expressing Feelings

Involving children in the aftercare arrangements will make them feel valued, their input appreciated and help them cope as they try to make sense of their loss. Perhaps they could write a letter or poem to their pet to be given to the pet at the time of cremation or burial. Children are very good at expressing their feelings through drawing or they may like to make a journal of all their wonderful happy memories they have of their pet.

As a precaution



You may wish to enlist the help of teachers or leaders of any pre/after school social clubs they attend, by explaining what has happened and they can keep an eye on the child and step in to help support them if necessary.

If you need any information or guidance in supporting children through pet bereavement please contact Living with Pet Bereavement (www.livingwithpetbereavement.com)

Reactions by age

Under 2yrs

Infants and very young children are unlikely to react to the death of a pet, however, they are very aware of tension or change in their parent's emotional state. Reassure them by hugging and holding them, and keep their routine as normal as possible.

2yrs – 7yrs

Children in this age bracket often do not realise that death is a permanent state. Do not try to hide a pet's illness or death, as they are often the first to sense that something is wrong. Let a child ask questions, and allow them to express their emotions.

7yrs -12yrs

Children of this age can understand that death is a permanent state. They may ask very specific questions with regard to why and how the pet died. Most children of this age will want to be involved in aftercare of their pet e.g. home burial.

Teenagers

Many teenagers can have a very difficult time working through their grief. They may not be open and honest about how much emotional pain they are experiencing, which may be compounded by peer pressure.



What Helps

Take time to explain a pet's needs properly, and talk openly and honestly with a child -

- Explain the difference between the life expectancy of a pet to that of a human.
- Don't make up stories as to what happened to a pet, tell the truth.
- Be patient - a child may keep asking the same questions over and over again while they try to make sense of their loss.
- Don't discourage a child from asking questions.
- Be honest with a child but refrain from giving them too much detail.
- Encourage children to make a memorial to their pet.
- Encourage children to talk openly about how they feel.

It is important to monitor children post the loss of their pet for any changes in their behaviour. Some children may regress in their behaviour by reverting to comforting ways or they may feel responsible for the death of their pet and need to be reassured that there was nothing they could have done differently.



Getting another Pet

There is no right or wrong time to introduce a new pet to the family, however if a pet is introduced too soon, a child may get the impression that pets are easily replaced or the child may not be ready for another pet. Introducing a new pet should be a family decision.

When the time is right to get another pet you may wish to look at the many pet rescue centres throughout the country.

Now available to purchase on Amazon
'Surviving Pet Loss' by Dawn Murray



Living with Pet Bereavement
www.livingwithpetbereavement.com



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When the time comes to say goodbye.....



Helping Children cope with Pet Bereavement