

Veterinary Wisdom[®]
About Helping
Children Through a
Pet's Euthanasia

Dana Durrance, M.A.



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World by the Tail, Inc.
126 W. Harvard St, Ste. 5
Fort Collins, CO 80525
1-888-271-8444
info@wbtt.com
www.veterinarywisdom.com

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I've written this eBooklet for you if you are supporting a child through pet loss. My goal is to give you the most helpful information so that you can support your child in the best way possible.

Children and Grief

Ah...children. Yes indeed, they are wonderful little souls. They can drive you crazy and touch your heart all at the same time. I personally love to be around children (unless they are waking me up in the middle of the night). Often the things that make children so challenging is the exact thing that makes them so wonderful. This is particularly true when it comes to the issues of loss and grief. It can be very intimidating to talk with children about death; yet in some ways, they are much easier to talk to than adults. They have fewer pre-conceived notions about death and are far more receptive to discussions about it than are most adults.

In today's society and culture, we tend to struggle a great deal with the concepts of loss and death. This is understandable given the painful emotions surrounding death. However, it seems that as our culture and technology advance, we have become further and further removed from death. In some ways, death has become a sanitized version of what it used to be and we are very reluctant to look at it straight on. The problem of course is that death is as natural a part of life as birth. It is a constant, unavoidable part of the life cycle and when it comes, many of us are unprepared to deal with it. Because we avoid discussions of death and deal with it only through hushed tones and "behind closed doors," we lack many skills when we must face the inevitable situations.

The good news about children is that most of them have not yet learned the societal "rules" surrounding grief. They don't share the same taboos as adults and are often quite open and receptive to discussions involving death. In that sense, they are very open to expressing their thoughts and feelings and you do not have to handle them with kid gloves (pun intended).

Of course, children do need special consideration and support. Since they are not adults, they have different ways of understanding and dealing with death and grief. Additionally, children have their own special relationships with pets. Pets often assume the role of playmates, siblings, parents, or even protectors. Like adults, children also experience the unconditional love that pets offer and derive all the same benefits. Pets

offer love and comfort when they feel rejected by family or friends and will stand by children even when being disciplined by parents or when there are conflicts with friends. Children come to trust that their pet will never forsake them and will love them no matter what happens.

Because of these special relationships, children can form tremendously strong bonds with their pets. In fact, they often spend more time with pets than adults do and many times it is the child in the family who alerts the parent to initial health problems. My husband tells me that in his veterinary practice, it is often a child who will give him a more accurate and detailed physical history of the pet than a parent. While a parent might know some general details about when a pet became ill, the child knows the exact day, time, and circumstances surrounding the problem.

The Impact of Pet Loss on Children

Just as there are societal taboos surrounding death and grief, there are also myths about it and we usually abide by these myths. Some of the most harmful myths involve children. For example, many people believe that children are very resilient during these times and that they do not grieve with the same intensity as adults. Because people believe this myth, they also believe that pets' deaths are fairly trivial losses. If you are supporting a child through pet death it is essential for you to remember that this is not the case. Always remember that children do grieve when a pet dies, they simply grieve in different ways than adults.

Another harmful myth is the belief that pet loss serves as a "dress rehearsal" for the "real thing." Children genuinely love their pets and depending upon the child, can be deeply affected by a death. Pet loss, then, is not a time for you to have unemotional discussions with your child about death and grief. It's an opportunity for you to insure that your child is informed, educated, included, comforted, and reassured about death so that he/she can gain the confidence necessary to face loss and recover from it.

Because childhood pet loss rarely gets the attention it deserves, there is usually not enough support for children to grieve their pets' deaths. Children are usually expected to rapidly recover from grief often with a suggestion to quickly replace the pet. Children are also often ignored during pet illness and left out of euthanasia decision-making. This can be very harmful to children and it is important for you to take an honest and open approach.

In order to involve your child openly, you must be able to talk to your child in a way that is appropriate to his/her developmental level. At different ages, children have different intellectual skills and abilities.

Below is a list of children's developmental levels and abilities. The goal of this is to help show you that children grieve just as adults, but express it differently because of their shorter attention spans and varying levels of intellectual development. The categories are somewhat arbitrary and

there is a lot of overlap between them. Children deal with grief based on the knowledge and skills they have at the time of the loss. The key is to look at the individual needs and abilities of the child you are supporting.

Infants (Birth- two years)

When pets die, babies feel the increased levels of stress that arise in the family, but they are not aware of the cause of the tension. Infants respond to high stress levels by crying, whining, clinging, withdrawing, and/or regressing.

Babies are best reassured by hugs, cuddling, and special time devoted to them. Family routines should be kept as normal as possible.

Toddlers and Pre-schoolers (Two years – four years)

At this age, children still don't understand that death is permanent and universal. They miss their playmates and ask lots of questions. Toddlers and pre-schoolers are very willing to talk about death and are more relaxed and curious about it than any other age group. They have not yet learned to think of death as a taboo topic, or to think of grief as shameful or embarrassing. They may discuss death with great enthusiasm and focus on details that you might consider morbid (blood, guts, body parts, etc.) Young children may or may not cry about their grief and may have tremendous mood swings that seem peculiar. This is normal. It occurs because young children cannot maintain the same intensity of emotions as adults. It is very common for a pre-schooler to be very upset and crying one moment, but then ask to go out and play the next. This in no way, means that they don't experience the grief. Their emotions just can't be sustained for a long time. Adults should never get upset with a pre-schooler for not showing emotion or having mood swings, but rather give them the space to experience and express their feelings in ways that they need to.

Toddlers and pre-schoolers often feel confusion, fear, and sadness about death, but often lack the language skills to express these emotions. They may express their feelings by "acting out" (hitting, kicking, throwing temper tantrums, and/or breaking known rules) because they

don't have other more positive ways to release their pain, anxiety, or grief.

They may also show symptoms of separation anxiety, developing clinging behaviors or withdrawing from normal friends and activities. They may also show regressive behaviors such as wanting a bottle or pacifier or having bathroom accidents when they were previously well trained. Physical complaints like stomachaches, sore throats, and chronic fatigue are also signs of grief. The best way to reassure young children is through love, affection, and maintaining family routines as much as possible.

Young children explore death through play because it is the major way in which they work through their questions and feelings about the world. They might draw pictures or create scenarios in which their dolls or toys "die." This is completely normal, healthy, and should be encouraged. This is how they deal with new information (through experimentation). When our family golden retriever died, my daughter who was six-years old at the time) started having "Barbie funerals" out in the backyard sandbox. I played with her and encouraged her to tell me what was happening. By playing with her, she was able to express her feelings and questions about our dog's death in a way that was helpful to her.

Early School-aged Children (Five years – eight years)

Early school-aged children are less willing to talk about death. They often personify death and think of it as a being like the "grim reaper" or as some kind of monster. They think of death in concrete ways and believe they can hide from it or avoid it. This may cause them to feel angry with the loved one who died. They don't understand why their loved one didn't just run away or hide when death came for them.

They may also feel that death is within their control just as hero figures do amazing things to prevent it. Early school-aged children are in the "magical thinking" phase of intellectual development. This means they believe the world revolves around them and is, for the most part, under their control. Because they believe that they have control over death, they may feel a huge responsibility to keep death from happening. Their beliefs (along with the beliefs of younger children) are further confused

by television programs where death appears to be reversible. On TV, actors are killed but then reappear again next week on different programs. Cartoon characters are killed, get up, and come alive again.

With magical thinking, children this age may also believe that their thoughts have the power to make things happen. If they ever got angry with, or had a mean thought about their pet (e.g., because the pet chewed up their favorite toy), they might believe that those thoughts caused the pet's death. It is essential to reassure children this age that their pet's death is never their fault or responsibility

As with younger children, early school-aged children may discuss death in morbid detail and even make up stories to exaggerate with their friends. They may be very curious about dead bodies and ask to touch or even hold their pet's dead body. This is very normal because they are trying to understand what death means and how it affects a body. I once helped a family euthanize their family cat and afterwards, the eight year-old boy started poking at the cat's eyeballs. Although horrifying to the mother, I assured her that her son was normal and simply satisfying his curiosity about death.

Generally, around the age of eight, early school-aged children realize death is permanent and universal. This can be a difficult time for them as they begin to think about the death of everyone they love. It is important for these children to talk about their losses and to ask questions about death in an open manner without fear of judgment. Just as with younger children, they need love, reassurance and support as they move through the grief process.

Late School-aged Children (Nine years – 12 years)

The majority of older school-aged children know death is irreversible and that it happens to everyone eventually. They are capable of sustaining intense periods of grief and can become preoccupied with the loss, particularly if they were very close to the pet.

Like younger children, older school-aged children may ask some shocking questions about death. They may be curious about

dismemberment during autopsies or deterioration of a body after burial. This is one of the ways they deal with anxiety. It is most helpful to give them honest answers and ways to satisfy their curiosity. This may include viewing their pets' bodies, helping to dig a grave, visiting a crematory, and participating in a goodbye or memorial ceremony. As with younger children, it is very important to allow open, honest talks and to provide love, comfort, and reassurance in non-judgmental ways.

Adolescents (13 years - 19 years)

Anyone who has ever known an adolescent knows that they are self-conscious and have contradictory mood swings. Their thoughts and feelings are often confusing and difficult to sort out. One day, a teen-ager will want to be treated like an adult and the next day want to be treated like a younger child. Similarly, grieving teen-agers may act devastated by a pets' death one day and will say it is "no big deal" the next.

Most adolescents feel awkward about their developing bodies and pets are often the only ones they allow to be physically close to them. It is important to remember that when pets die, many teenagers miss the physical comfort that their pet gave them.

It is important to not overburden teenagers during their grief over a pet. Adolescents are sometimes asked to take responsibility for younger siblings during pet loss and their own grief may be minimized or put on hold. Because of their unpredictable mood swings, teen-agers are often thought to be "okay" simply because they do not show any outward signs of grief. This is a mistake and it's important to allow them time and space to grieve even if they appear to be fine or even indifferent.

For some teen-agers (especially older ones 16-19), their pets have been with them through most of their childhood and they cannot remember life without that pet. This may be a profound bond and it is important to be aware of how significant this is when the pet dies. In essence, when a childhood pet dies, an important part of the teen's childhood dies, too and represents the "end of an era."

Another common issue for teen-agers is the guilt they may feel for "abandoning" their pets for having spent less time with the pet and more

time with friends, jobs, school activities, dating, etc. Some also fear their pets may have died feeling “angry” at them for “not being there” anymore. Though this guilt is normal it can be addressed by reassuring them that they always loved their pet and did not abandon them.

Teen-agers are by nature rebellious and this need to “act out” can be made worse by insisting that they grieve in certain ways or within a certain time frame. Most of the time, adolescents should be treated in the same ways as younger children, with adults offering them time to talk and to ask questions about their feelings in a loving and supportive way.

Supporting a Child Before Pet Death or Euthanasia

As I mentioned earlier, children are often excluded before a pet's death and during euthanasia. You must work hard to ensure this doesn't happen. It's human nature for adults to want to protect children and avoid frightening them. Although excluding them from the details of illness and euthanasia may seem like the way to do this, it usually makes children only more afraid. Children are very smart and intuitive. Chances are good that your child already knows that something is wrong. It is far less frightening to be involved rather than being left out of the process and feeling powerless.

When adults do involve children, they often downplay pet illness or pretend that nothing is happening. Adults sometime even fabricate stories about the details surrounding a pet's illness or euthanasia. Ignoring the problem and lying only creates more distress for children. When lied to, children become more confused about what's happening to their beloved friend. They feel sad, scared, helpless, and have many questions, but do not know what to do about it. If adults are reluctant to talk about the pet, children will shut down and remain unsupported.

Keep in mind that children have very active imaginations and will create a mental image of what is happening to their pet regardless. More times than not, what they imagine is far worse than the truth. Using open, honest descriptions of the pet's illness with simple language appropriate to the child's age is the best course of action. Your goal should be to inform, support, and most importantly, give your child permission to share his/her questions and feelings with you.

Describing Euthanasia to a Child

Talking about euthanasia is difficult in any situation and it may seem even more intimidating to talk with to a child. However, as I mentioned earlier, since children are often more comfortable talking about the concepts of illness and death, they will take their lead from you. If you show your child that you are open and honest, he/she will relax and do the same. Below are some important strategies in talking about euthanasia with a child:

- Children are concrete thinkers and need to understand euthanasia in the most direct language possible. Never use euphemisms like “put to sleep.” Remember, before the age of five, most children do not understand that death is permanent and universal. Confusing sleep and death only creates problems. Children go to sleep every night and you do not want to frighten them about the prospect of going to sleep. The best words to use are “helped to die.”

Example: “Fluffy is very sick and we have run out of medications to help her. The veterinarian cannot make her any better. Because we love Fluffy we are going to help her die without pain so that she doesn’t hurt anymore.”

- Educate your child about the euthanasia process. Your child needs to know that his/her pet will die in a very peaceful and painless way. Do not leave your child wondering how his/her pet died and what was happening during those last few moments. Be open to any questions and support your child’s feelings.

Example: “Because we love Fluffy, we do not want her to hurt anymore. To make sure that she doesn’t, the veterinarian will give Fluffy a drug that only animals can take. It will stop her heart and help her die without any pain at all.”

- If old enough, let your child decide if he/she wants to be present at euthanasia. Make sure he/she knows what to expect every step of the way. Discuss the euthanasia process in depth and answer any questions your child may have. Ask your veterinarian to talk with your child directly if needed. Make sure your child understands fully what he/she will see, how the pet will look, feel, and behave, and what appropriate actions he/she can take after the pet is dead (eg. petting, hugging, crying, or spending time with the pet's body.) Let your child know that you will support him/her the whole time.
- Regardless of whether or not your child decides to be present at euthanasia, give your child an opportunity to say good-bye in his/her own way. If your child is not present at euthanasia, make sure he/she knows who will be with the pet at the time of death and that the pet will be loved and comforted during those final moments.
- Be aware that your child may be angry with you or your veterinarian for not saving the pet. Children see adults as all-powerful beings and it will be hard for him/her to understand that you cannot make this situation better. Let your child know that it is okay to be angry and understand that death is a natural part of life.
- Allow yourself to show emotion to your child. Children take their cues from adults. If adults appear stoic and unemotional about a pet's death it may be strange and confusing to them. You can be a role model for your child in how to express grief in healthy and positive ways. Give assurance that you will still take care of him/her even though you are sad and grieving.
- Provide mementos for your child to keep. Having a physical link to the pet such as a paw print or other object can ease the grief process. Your child will draw comfort in having a tangible connection to the pet in some form or another.

Explaining Body Care to a Child

Many adults believe that this is too difficult a topic to involve children. However, you already know what I'm going to say...it's better to involve your child whenever possible. Children have tremendous curiosity about what happens to a body after death and even if you avoid the topic, they will likely bring it up anyway. When explaining body care to your child, it's important to talk to him/her with sensitivity and with enough detail so he/she is able to understand what is happening. Keep your child's cognitive abilities and developmental levels in mind as you describe body care terminology. Draw pictures and use appropriate "props"(caskets, urns, cremains, etc.) to explain what will take place.

As you know, what children imagine is often much worse than what actually occurs, so honesty is still the best policy.

Example: "When animals die, their bodies don't work anymore. They can't breathe, move about, eat, drink, or play. After a little while, they become stiff and cold and can even start to smell. This happens naturally to anyone who dies. Because we still love our animals, though, we must take care of their dead bodies. There are several ways to handle a pet's body after death. I can explain them to you."

Think ahead about how you want to explain burial, cremation, disposal in a landfill, and rendering.

Burial

To explain burial, say something like,

“Burying means you dig a hole in the ground deep enough so other animals can't dig Fluffy's body up. Then you put Fluffy's body in it. Some people like to put their pet's body in a blanket, cardboard box, or a casket before burying it. A casket is a box that is made especially for burying animals in the ground.” You

might want to put special toys or treats in the grave with Fluffy.“

“Once Fluffy’s body has been placed into the hole, it is covered with dirt. This special place becomes a grave. After the grave has been filled with dirt, you can place something special on top of it, like a big rock, some flowers, or a something with Fluffy’s name on it. If the grave is close by, you can go and visit Fluffy's grave whenever you feel like talking to or remembering her. If you decide to bury Fluffy, it will be important to remember that she doesn’t feel anything once she is dead. She doesn’t need to breathe, play, or eat. Once she’s dead, she cannot come back to life.”

Cremation

To explain cremation say something like,

“When an animal's body is cremated, it is put into a large container that gets very, very hot. It is made especially for cremating animals. The temperature in it gets so hot that it causes the animal's body to melt down into small pieces. The heat causes the fur, and all the other soft parts of the body to disappear. Then, all that remains are the bones. The bones are usually in very small pieces and are called "cremains." The cremains usually look like a mixture of light colored sand and small pebbles.”

“You might also want to think about cremation as a form of recycling. During her life, Fluffy’s body was in one form; but, now that she is dead, her body has changed into a different one. During spring and summer when leaves are alive, they are soft and strong. When the leaves die, they crumple up and change into another form. The most important thing to remember is that animals don't feel anything after they're dead. They don't feel anything during cremation.”

“After cremation, some people like to keep the cremains of their pets in a jar, a box, or an urn. Others scatter them in a special place.”

Mass Burial in a Landfill

To explain mass burial, say something like,

"When people decide not to bury their animals themselves or to cremate them, veterinarians often take care of their animals' bodies instead. They take the animals' bodies to a place where many different kinds of animals are buried together. This place has a giant grave where animals and dirt are all mixed together. This giant grave is called a landfill."

“If you decide on mass burial for Fluffy's body, she will be buried with other animals and you won't be able to visit her grave. But, you can think about her whenever you like and remember the special times you shared together.”

Children and Horses

Children can form just as strong a bond with horses as any other pets. This is especially true for adolescents who may have known the horse for a significant part of their childhood or for all of their lives. If you are helping a child to say good-bye to a beloved horse, there are some special issues to consider:

- There are fewer options available for the euthanasia and body care of a horse. Even if the veterinarian does everything possible to make euthanasia peaceful, the horse might still respond with reflexive movements. The horse will not feel this, but the sight of it might be difficult for your child to watch. You should talk in advance about the location and your child's presence with your veterinarian. If your child decides to be present, ensure that your child is completely prepared for the euthanasia process including any possible side effects of the drugs used and any unpredictable behaviors.
- Understand that for the child's own safety, he/she will not be able to stand by the horse during the euthanasia. He/she will likely watch from a safe distance.
- Encourage your child to take a memento of the horse. Ideas include taking a lock of the horse's tail or mane, braiding it, and tying it with a ribbon. Your child can even take the last set of horseshoes or consider making a clay impression of the hoof print (see *World by the Tail's* product guide).
- Whether your child is present or not, give him/her time to say good-bye either before or after the euthanasia (or both).

- Discuss body care options ahead of time. Burial may be an option, but more likely options include cremation, rendering, or removal of the body to a county site.

Rendering

To explain rendering, say something like,

“When large animals die, it is very difficult to bury them and very expensive to cremate them. Because of this, most people send their horses, llamas, mules, cows, etc. to rendering plants. These businesses use animals' bodies to change them into another form (using the recycling concept). They use the bodies for other good purposes. Many animal foods, fertilizers, and even some kitty litter are partially made from the remains of dead animals. Because animals can't use their bodies after they are dead, rendering is one way to reuse or recycle them. It's important for you to remember that your horse does not feel anything after death and we must to take care of his/her body as best as we can.”

Children and Exotic Pets

Children can become very attached to the exotic animals known as “pocket pets” (hamsters, gerbils, rats, and even reptiles). Although many adults do not consider these bonds as important as those with more traditional animals, many children feel highly attached. It is very important not to minimize your child’s feelings if this is the case. The diversity of exotic animals makes for a wide range of lifespan and health concerns. If your child is facing the illness and euthanasia of an exotic pet, it is important to consider the following issues:

- The treatment of the pet can be very tricky and unpredictable. Surgery and anesthesia can be difficult to give and it is quite possible that the pet may not survive.
- Presence at euthanasia may create complications. Frequently the most compassionate way to euthanize an exotic animal can be tough to witness (such as an injection directly into the heart). Consult with your veterinarian and be fully informed of the euthanasia process and any potential complications so that you may explain it to your child.
- Give your child time to say good-bye regardless of his/her presence at euthanasia.

Children and Farm Animals

Animals traditionally viewed as “farm animals” (goats, llamas, pigs and even cows), can become family pets. If your child is attached to one of these types of animals, it is important to validate his/her feelings even though society has yet to fully recognize this bond as legitimate. If your child is facing the death or euthanasia of this type of animal, consider all the same issues that apply to the illness and euthanasia of a horse.

If your child belongs to a 4-H club and has raised the animal since it was a baby, he/she has probably formed a very strong attachment. Even though the animal is not necessarily facing death, your child is still dealing difficult emotions of loss and grief. Children who belong to 4-H clubs know ahead of time that the animal they raise will be sold or sent elsewhere eventually. However, the bond formed during the animal’s babyhood still results in a very strong and meaningful relationship. It is essential that you allow your child time to say good-bye and be with the animal before it is sold or sent elsewhere. Ways you can support your child in this situation include:

- Allow your child to take a memento of the animal such as a hoof print, wool, or other meaningful object.
- Have your child take video of the animal as a keepsake or take photos of to put together in a special photo album or scrapbook.
- Talk with your child about what memories he/she will have of that special relationship and validate any emotions the child feels about the animal going away.

Supporting a Child After Pet Death

If a beloved pet has died, children need support in many of the same ways they would need support during pet loss and euthanasia. Just as with discussions about euthanasia, your child will take his/her lead from you in discussions about death. If you approach the situation with honest, open, and direct communication, you will likely create the best chance for a good grief outcome. Just as lies and deception about a pet's illness are harmful, so are lies about a pet's death.

In an effort to protect children from pain, some adults will lie to children about the details and way in which a pet died. The classic example of the child being told that "Fluffy ran away" not only leaves the child worried about what happened to their friend, but also feeling abandoned by someone they loved and trusted. They may feel that they did something to make the pet angry or that the pet does not love them anymore. This can be emotionally devastating for children as now they not only have to grapple with intense grief, but feelings of abandonment and guilt as well.

In the long run, honesty about a pet's death actually protects the child from any unnecessary distress. Dishonesty not only increases a child's pain, but can also have long lasting repercussions. Eventually, the child finds out the truth and then feels betrayed by the parent or person who lied to them. This breach of trust can have far reaching consequences. For example, the child might wonder, "if they lied to me about something as important as this, what else have they lied about?" Honesty shows respect for the child's relationship with the pet. In supporting your child after a pet's death, it is important to consider the following:

- Determine your child's understanding of death. Ask your child what death is and see if he/she can tell you. Does he/she understand that death is permanent and universal? Help him/her understand that death is a natural part of life and happens to all living things. It also means that in death the pet cannot move, breathe, eat, play, or even sleep. Talk about your own philosophy

around death and any family religious or spiritual beliefs about the afterlife. Be open to any questions.

- Be alert to “Magical Thinking.” As discussed earlier, young children believe that they have the power to make things happen simply by thinking about them. Thus, if the child has a mean or unkind thought about the pet, they may feel that they caused the pet to die. Gently explore your child’s feelings to insure that he/she is not feeling guilty for causing the pet’s death.
- Be aware that children express grief in different ways. Unlike adults, children do not possess the same verbal abilities to talk about their feelings and fears. They may work through their emotions in their play or in other ways. Understand that they still need support even if they do not outwardly express distress. Very young children may not be able to fully understand what is happening, but they are susceptible to the stress that is around them. Remember that very young children tend to “regress” in their behavior.
- Allow your child to talk about the pet as frequently as he/she desires. Accept tears as a sign of normal grief and do not worry about your child “getting upset.” Tears are necessary, and a good release for his/her emotions. Give your child creative ways to express his/her grief such as drawing pictures, writing stories, or singing songs about the pet. If you see your child talking about or acting out “death” in his/her play, join the child and be open to any questions or feelings that may arise.
- Alert other adults who interact with your child on a daily basis. Teachers, day care workers, counselors, and other adults should be informed of the situation so that they can offer additional support. If the child is angry with his/her parents, it might be helpful to talk about these feelings with someone other than the parents.

Helping a Child Memorialize a Pet

Memorialization is one of the *most effective* ways to support a child who is grieving the death of a pet. Since many children lack the verbal skills to articulate their feelings, memorializing gives them wonderful outlets to express their emotions and grief. It not only allows them to grieve in ways that they can and need to, but it gives them another chance to say good-bye to their treasured friend in a special way. This is also a time when children can be extremely involved in the process by adding to, or even creating the memorial themselves.

There are hundreds of ways a child can honor a beloved pet's life. Your goal is to let your child use his/her own creativity and talents. Tell your child that by creating a memorial, he/she is making sure that the pet will never be forgotten. Share stories and happy times while you do this. This will help your child focus on times other than the pet's death and will help with guilt or other emotions your child may be struggling with. I've listed some ideas on ways to memorialize a pet. This is just a starting point. You and your child can do the rest!

- Create a living tribute” to the pet’s life. Grief can be eased by being able to “see and hear” the pet through the magic of photos and videotapes.
- Plant a tree, flowers, or a bush in special memory of the pet. Plant this in a location that holds special meaning for your child, or where the pet’s body or ashes are buried. Children appreciate having a special place to go to when they need to feel close to their pet.
- Make a clay imprint of the pet’s paw as a special keepsake.
- Keep whiskers or tufts of fur from a special spot on the pet’s body and place them in a locket.
- Have your child write a story or make a tribute of the pet’s life. Have the child write about funny times or special antics about the pet that made him/her laugh. Have the child write a poem that expresses his/her love for the pet.

- Look for special memorials available through your veterinarian or other animal related organizations. Many veterinarians have memorial plaques or other tributes that clients and children can utilize.
- Keep the pet's ID tags in a special place in your child's room.
- Have a professional portrait or sculpture done of the pet. Many artists will do these after the pet's death using a photograph. You can also use a photograph to make your child a T-shirt, clock, button, coffee mug, etc.
- Place ashes in a potted houseplant.
- If the pet is not buried near you, take pictures of the grave and keep these in a special place where your child can "visit" when he/she wants to.

Last Thoughts... Seek Support

Helping a child through pet loss can be very difficult. You want to be honest but worry about saying “the right thing” and making mistakes. There is no way to protect your child from experiencing any pain during this time, but if you follow your heart while always respecting your child’s feelings, you are on the right track.

Don’t forget that you need support too! Helping your child will probably stir up your own emotions and it’s important for you to take care of yourself and your own needs.

If you feel stuck and don’t know where to go, please remember that there are many resources out there available to help you. You need not go through this time alone! Visit World by the Tail’s website and we will be there to answer any questions while giving you the support that you need. Good luck and I wish you well.*

* Much of the material in this booklet was adapted from Lagoni, L., Butler, C. and Hetts, S. The Human-Animal Bond and Grief, Philadelphia, PA. W.B.Saunders Co., 1994.

Inside the Veterinary Hospital

Veterinarians often tell me that one of the more awkward situations they face in practice is knowing how much to involve children in the death of their pets. Just as there are with parents, there is wide variety of preferences among the veterinary community ranging from completely excluding children to wanting them to be as involved as much as possible (including being present during euthanasia). Veterinarians often want to do what's best for children, but their own fears and anxieties sometimes get in the way. If your veterinarian demonstrates reluctance to involve your child, you need to be your child's advocate and let your veterinarian know how you feel.

Children often benefit and express their grief better when they can talk with veterinarians about their pets; why they got sick, why they can't make the pet better, and why the pet is going to be euthanized. Some veterinarians are better at doing this than others, but as an involved and caring parent, you can assure your veterinarian that you are comfortable with open, honest, and frank discussions. If your veterinarian is not aware of your child's own cognitive and developmental levels, you may have to give him/her some help in understanding your child's own perspective.

The bottom line is that all veterinarians want to do what is best for children and will respect the parents' wishes when they are made clear.

Between You and Me

As the parent of two small children myself, I can guess what you're thinking...all this advice from a grief counselor may sound good in theory; but does this stuff work in the "real world with real children?" I can assure you it really does!

I wasn't so sure myself until my own dog Roxanne died a few years ago. I found myself in the same situation wondering the same thing. Here was my chance to use the very same strategies I had been giving to parents for years. My daughter (who was six at the time) responded amazingly well to open and honest discussions. She wasn't sure at first if she wanted to be present at Roxanne's euthanasia, but ended up staying the whole time after my husband and I talked her through it and gave her permission to leave the room if she wanted. My son (who was two) naturally did not understand everything, but was given an opportunity to say good-bye and ask as many questions as he wanted.

While it certainly helped that my husband is a veterinarian and that we were able to euthanize Roxanne at home, I think the biggest thing that sticks out in my mind was how much we bonded as a family that night. We were able to share our grief and support each other during an intensely difficult time. I'm glad that we could be role models for our children to show that grief (although very hard) is a natural and normal part of life.

We have done many things to honor Roxanne's life including a "memorial service" in the mountains, but the thing that I like the most is that we still talk about her almost every day. We have kept Roxanne's memory alive in our hearts and by doing so – she is still a very strong and vibrant presence in our family.

So be assured. If you take the time to support your child well...this stuff really works.

About the Author

Dana Durrance is a veterinary grief specialist/consultant for World by the Tail, Inc. She is the former director of the nationally renowned Changes Program at the CSU Veterinary Teaching Hospital and has over a decade of experience as a grief counselor, educator and trainer within the veterinary profession.

She is also the co-owner and grief counselor at Mountain Shadows Pet Hospital in Colorado Springs, Colorado (which she owns with her husband--a small animal veterinarian). She holds a Masters degree in clinical psychology and has a wealth of experience working with hundreds of pet owners as well as training veterinary professionals at national veterinary conferences, veterinary hospitals and schools. She has published in multiple veterinary-related books, journals and textbooks. She has presented at over 45 conferences, seminars, and workshops and is a regular speaker at Alameda East Veterinary Hospital (home of Animals Planet's Emergency Vets).

She lives in Colorado Springs, Colorado with her husband Steve, their daughter Erin, son Noah, and their three dogs.

About the ePublisher

World by the Tail, Inc.

World by the Tail, Inc., honors the emotional power of the human-animal bond. Love. Protectiveness. Gratitude. Grief. These powerful feelings are part and parcel of lives shared with companion animals.

Emotions are meant to be shared and supported. Whether you are a veterinarian, animal health technician, mental health professional or pet lover, World by the Tail, Inc., exists to support your efforts on behalf of companion animals. We want to help you celebrate the good times shared with animals—first days of puppyhood, medical rescues, cat show championships ---as well as deal with the difficulties--- chronic disease, the stress of care giving, terminal illness and companion animal death.

At World by the Tail, we care for people who care for pets.

Contact us at 1-888-271-8444 or online at www.veterinarywisdom.com.
We can also be reached via email at info@wbtt.com.



A Personal Note from Us to You

If you are reading this book, you will probably be saying a final good-bye to your beloved pet in the very near future. At World by the Tail, Inc., we understand that this is an emotionally difficult time. Each of us has experienced the grief of pet loss, too.

Because we've been there, we want you to know about a special keepsake that helped each of us cope during the days and weeks following our pets' deaths. That keepsake is a ClayPaws® print.

A ClayPaws® print is a life size impression of your pet's paw set in a modeling clay compound. A ClayPaws® print is as individual as a human fingerprint and is symbolic of the deep relationships we share with our beloved pets. In our experience, ClayPaws® prints are one of the best ways you can pay tribute to the special bond you have shared with your pet.

At World by the Tail, Inc., we manufacture and distribute ClayPaws®, the original paw print kit™, so we can provide comfort to people like you when your companion animals die. We recommend that you make a print for each child and adult in your family.

Our sincere condolences to you for the loss of your pet. If your veterinarian does not offer ClayPaws®, the original paw print kit, please visit us on-line at www.veterinarywisdom.com or call us at 1-888-271-8444 to order.

"I wanted to let you know how much ClayPaws® has meant to us. Satin, our first of two litter mate sisters, passed away July 2004 from cancer. Her sister Silkie passed away in February 2005, also from cancer. Both veterinary hospitals that treated our girls offered us the chance to forever capture additional memories of the "girls" by using your product ClayPaws® to do their paw prints. It has meant the world to us! Thanks again for your product. We wouldn't trade our ClayPaws® prints for anything."

Linda and Ron F., Pet Owners