

# CHILDREN AND PET LOSS

Losing a pet can be a significant challenge for children and is often their first encounter with death. They may rely on their pet as a source of comfort and companionship when they are feeling sick, upset, sad or lonely. Here are some tips to help discuss death and help your children cope with their grief.

**Always be honest and patient.** Children may have trouble understanding deaths' permanence and walk around asking where their pet is. Although tempting to explain death in terms of *being put to sleep* or that your pet *ran away and might not come back*, saying these things could create anxiety that the same thing may happen to other loved ones. Lying to your child, no matter how well-meaning, won't alleviate the sadness they feel and a child may later become angry or resentful that you lied.

**Allow your child to express their feelings.** Talk to them and allow them to express and feel the feelings they are sharing with you.

**Breaking the news.** Do not put off telling a child. Tell them as soon as possible. Delaying this information may lead to feelings of betrayal and resentment. Deliver the news one-on-one if possible in a comfortable and safe place for the child. Don't avoid the words 'death' or 'dying'. Limit details for younger children.

**Be prepared.** Be prepared to answer questions optimistically about what happens to a pet after it dies. Your reply will depend on your own understanding of death, belief and your child's age. For very old pets or those battling a terminal illness, consider talking to your child *before* the death occurs.

**Euthanized pets.** If euthanizing your pet is the most compassionate option, you can say things like:

- Jack would never have gotten better on his own.
- This is the kindest way to prevent Bella from suffering.
- Lucy will pass peacefully.

Reassure your child that your pet won't feel scared or be in pain and



**Sudden death of a pet.** If the loss of a pet is sudden or as a result of an unfortunate accident, calmly explain what has happened. Allow your child's questions to guide how much information you share. An example of what could be said is: "Buster died this

morning and he's not coming back and I'm very sad about it. It's okay for you to be sad too"

**Share your grief.** Don't be afraid to tell them that you're sad too and that it's okay to be sad or mad. Young children look to their parents as a model for behaviour. Sharing your grief lets them know that it's okay to grieve and provides a precious moment of intimacy between the two of you. You are showing that it's okay to talk about their feelings or cry when they feel sad and lonely. They will find comfort knowing that they're not alone in feeling sad. You can even share stories about pets that you lost as a child and how difficult it was to say goodbye. This shows that it's natural to feel all of those emotions.

**Helping a child cope.** Some children may feel guilty about times they were unkind or didn't take good care of their pet or feel angry that their pet couldn't get any better. You can help them by:

- **Being There.** Be patient, listen carefully when they share their feelings and be sure to give them lots of reassuring hugs and cuddles. They will remember your compassion and understanding.
- **Reassure them that they won't always feel this way.** Let them know that it is okay to not want to talk about them at first and that you will always be there for them when they are ready.
- **Age appropriate resources.** Use the many books and videos out there that discuss the topic of death in a language your child will understand.
- **Maintain your child's normal routine.** You might be tempted to have your child skip a few music lessons or miss a play-date because they feel sad, but it could be harmful in the long run if your child becomes used to withdrawing themselves from friends and activities they enjoy when they feel sad.
- **Watch for warning signs.** Keep a close eye on your child and watch for signs that they may be struggling with grief: being sad for weeks, having trouble sleeping, stopping participating in activities they once enjoyed or having difficulties in school. A few sessions with a counsellor or child therapist could be the best option for a child that is struggling to reconcile their loss.



**Remembering the pet.** Many children feel better about the loss of a pet if they can participate in some kind of farewell ceremony or memorial service for the animal. Your child might want to:

- Arrange a memorial service in your garden or a farewell ceremony and invite family members,
- Choose the pet memorial item or
- Create a scrapbook with memories of the pet

You could even suggest they volunteer at an animal shelter as a positive and constructive way for your child to honour the memory of their pet by giving back to animals in need.

Whatever the case, allow them to remember their pet in a way that means the most to them. This gives them a chance to work through their loss in a constructive and meaningful way. Speaking often about your pet with love is perhaps one of the best ways for your child to keep the memory of them alive. Share stories about your pet's funny moments and have your child tell you about their favourite memories.

Finally, reassure your child that while the pain of losing a pet will eventually fade away, the happy memories of their pet will always remain.

Yours Truly,



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