

How to Help Your Child Cope with the Loss of a Pet

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In our society, we place tremendous value on the care we give our pets. They become like members of the family. Thus, losing a beloved animal friend can be a terrible time for the whole family. It is natural to want to protect your children from painful experiences. However, most kids will be able to adjust to the loss of a pet if your approach is honest, gentle, and simple. This article will describe the grief process, specifically as children may experience it, and will offer several tips on how to help children cope with the death of a pet.

The most well-known grief expert is Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, who is the author of On Death and Dying. In her book, she outlines several stages of grief: Denial and Isolation; Anger; Bargaining; Depression; and Acceptance. For adults, these stages actually may be experienced simultaneously, appear in a different order, or some may be skipped all together. For children, the stages of grief may be even less clear, because their comprehension differs from adults. However, never assume that a child is too old or too young to grieve.

Grief is a process, not an event. It takes time. To help your children grieve in a healthy way, be honest about your own sorrow, and don't try to hide it. This will help your children feel less alone, and you can model a healthy way of dealing with sad feelings. Never criticize a child for tears, or tell them to "be strong." NEVER tell children how they should feel. It may help to explain that when we really love someone, even though we are separated by death, our loved ones never really go away because we always have loving memories.

Keep in mind that the emotional reaction to the death of a pet may depend on the degree of the child's involvement with the animal. Take the time to discover what each child is experiencing by asking specific questions about their thoughts and feelings. Don't assume that you know. You can help your child to celebrate the life and good memories of your pet by looking through photo albums to stimulate special stories and funny memories. Both a good laugh and a good cry can be therapeutic. Children (and adults) can often benefit from some kind of ritual or ceremony. The pet, or its ashes, can be buried or scattered. Children can be reminded that life always continues, and that their pet will make things grow. If your pet is cremated, you can scatter some wildflower seeds along with the ashes, so what grows will be a tribute to the life of the pet. Some children may want to bury the pet with a beloved toy, or with a note they have written, or with a favorite picture (keep a copy). Or, some children will prefer to keep these things for themselves as reminders of good times. There are no rights or wrongs.

Depending on your child's age, there are some useful guidelines for discussing your pet's death. Two and three year olds are not likely to have an understanding of death. They should be told

that their pet has died and will not return. They should be reassured that it has nothing to do with what they have said or done. Common reactions may include a temporary loss of speech and some general distress. It should be temporary, and often a child in this age range will readily accept another pet in place of the one that has died. With ANY child of ANY age, NEVER use the phrase, “put to sleep.” Young children can misinterpret this phrase, which suggests an adult’s denial of the death, and they can develop fears of bedtime. Similarly, suggesting to a child that “God has taken” the pet can cause the child to become angry at the higher power and create conflict and confusion in the child.

Young children are very concrete in their thinking, and perceive the world through their senses. They may miss different things about your pet than you would expect, such as smell, sound, or tactile sensations. When talking to your children, you do not have to add a lot of details. Children may ask questions repetitively. Do not feel that you need to say more each time; their searching is part of the grieving process. Simply answer the questions, repeatedly if needed. If they want to know more, they will ask. You can tell if a child is really listening or just appearing to listen for your benefit (e.g., fidgeting, little eye contact).

Children ages four to six have some understanding of death, but are likely to interpret it as some type of continued existence. They may believe the pet is living underground while continuing to eat, breathe, and play. Or, they may think the pet is just asleep. Children these ages may connect any anger they felt toward the pet (especially if the pet’s behavior was problematic) with being responsible for the pet’s death. This view should be refuted, because they may also translate this belief into responsibility for deaths of family or friends. Children these ages may also see death as contagious and begin to fear their own deaths. Gentle reassurance is most helpful. Children’s grief during these ages may show up as bowel and bladder control problems, or problematic eating or sleeping. Several short discussions (as opposed to a marathon parent-child talk) that allow the child to freely express feelings can help clear these problems up.

Seven to nine year olds can appreciate the permanence of death. While they do not tend to fear their own deaths, they may develop concerns about the deaths of their parents. They may also develop curiosities about death in general. The best approach is frank, honest, simple responses. Grief in children these ages may manifest itself in school problems, learning problems, antisocial behaviors, aggression, or hypochondriacal concerns. They may also be clingy.

Offering choices when a pet dies is helpful to children. They can be offered choices about whether to bury or cremate, whether they want to be present at the burial or after, if there are any certain objects they would like to put in the grave, or if there is anything cherished of their pet’s that they would like, such as a collar or favorite toy.

Adolescents tend to react to the loss of a pet similarly to adults. At times this can include an absence of display of emotion, but it does not mean that your teen is not experiencing grief.

Local libraries often have very good books that address topics of children and grief, and some address pet loss specifically (e.g., Catheaven and Dogheaven by Cynthia Rylant). Additionally, veterinarians are paying increasing attention to the emotional issues associated with having an ailing pet or losing a pet, and can often provide useful support and direction. There are several

pet loss websites that may be helpful. They include www.lightning-strike.com; www.aplb.org/; www.cowpoke.com/Pages/Pethome.htm; www.pet-loss.net/. If all else fails, there is a site owned by a counselor in Washington state that connects you to literally hundreds of pet loss links, and this site is www.petgrief.com.

Losing a pet can be an emotionally exhausting and overwhelming experience for the whole family. The most basic rules of thumb for helping your child deal with grief are being open and not concealing your own sadness; not telling children how to feel; answering questions simply and honestly, and repeatedly if needed; avoiding euphemisms such as “put to sleep;” and allowing each child to grieve in his or her own way.

If your child shows problematic reactions to loss of a pet (e.g., the manifestations described above go on for more than 2-4 weeks), you may wish to consider consulting your primary care physician for a referral to a licensed psychologist or family therapist for guidance.

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