

I Miss You! The Final Grace: Helping Children Cope With The Loss Of A Pet

Thoughts, reminisces and advice for adults on helping children deal with the loss of a beloved pet. Brought to you by your friends at New Mexican Kennels.

"There is only one smartest dog in the world and every child has it."

Words of Advice

These words from Parent Educator and Pet Grief Counselor, Judy Helm Wright are good to remember:

"It is important to use correct terms when discussing death with children. They are very literal and so when you say "Fifi just died in her sleep, she did not feel any pain" or "Well, he got sick and died. That happens some time." or "She passed away." Kids will be afraid to go to bed or get a cold. In my work as a Parent Educator, I found how adults handled a child's first experience with death stayed with them forever. Help them to understand that while the "dead" pet can no longer breathe or eat or give kisses, their spirit and memory can stay in our hearts."

More Advice

- Don't shelter a child from the death experience. A child needs support and guidance to understand the loss, mourn and memorialize their loved one.
- The death is highly emotional even for well-adjusted adults, so it's important to seek support for your process in order to deal with your emotions

- Avoid projecting your concerns onto the child, perhaps creating problems that don't exist in their mind.

Sharing the News and the Grief

One of the most difficult parts about losing a pet may be breaking the bad news to kids. Try to do so one-on-one in a place where they feel safe and comfortable and not easily distracted.

As you would with any tough issue, try to gauge how much information kids need to hear based on their age, maturity level, and life experience.

If your pet is very old or has a lingering illness, consider talking to kids before the death occurs. If you have to euthanize your pet, you may want to explain that:

- The veterinarians has done everything that they can
- Your pet would never get better
- This is the kindest way to take the pet's pain away
- The pet will die peacefully, without feeling hurt or scared

Many kids want a chance to say goodbye beforehand, and some may be old enough or emotionally mature enough to be there to comfort the pet during the process.

If you do have to euthanize your pet, be careful about saying the animal went "to sleep" or "got put to sleep." Young kids tend to interpret events literally, so this can conjure up scary misconceptions about sleep or surgery and anesthesia.

If the pet's death is more sudden, calmly explain what has happened. Be brief, and let your child's questions guide how much information you provide.

Tears are Healing:

Children see tears and grief, and they learn from total immersion what bereavement means. Don't try to protect them from this reality. Let

them share your feelings to a reasonable degree – according to their maturity and ability to understand. This will help them to know that grief is normal and acceptable. Teach them that ultimately, all life is change and growth. That is a very hard lesson to learn, but a necessary one.

High Stress Situations:

Parental or sibling conflict, mental health issues, substance abuse, other family pressures – or another recent death add to the burden of grief. Children in high stress families often develop early dependencies and attachments with a family pet. When that companion dies, it may create a crisis for that child.

Age-Related Responses

Children do not respond to death as adults do. Their normal reactions are much more natural, curious and varied, until that is changed by the adult world.

Parents or guardians are the models for almost everything. The general subject of death is not unknown to children. They watch movies, television, and listen to what their friends have to say.

2-3 Year Olds:

Two to three year olds do not have the life experiences to give them an understanding of death.

- They should be told the pet has died and will not return.
- It is important to let them know they didn't do or say anything to cause their pet's death.
- Children at this age may not understand what death really means, but they will sense and copy your emotions and behavior.
- It is good to cry and show your own feelings of grief, but these must be controlled.

- At this age one will usually accept a new pet very easily.

4-6 Year Olds:

Children of this age usually have some understanding of death but may not comprehend that it is permanent. They may believe the pet is asleep.

They may also feel that past anger they displayed towards their pet, or perceived bad behavior was responsible for its death. Manifestations of grief may include bowel or bladder disturbances as well as a change in playing, eating and sleeping habits.

- Have frequent, brief discussions with the child to help them express feelings and concerns.
- Provide reassurance. Drawing pictures and writing stories about their loss may be helpful. Include the child in any funeral arrangements.

7-9 Year Olds:

Children in this age group know that death is irreversible. They do not normally think this might happen to them, but they may be concerned about the death of their parents. They are very curious and may ask questions that appear morbid. These questions are natural and are best answered frankly and honestly.

At this age they may manifest their grief in different ways, such as school problems, anti-social behavior, somatic or physical concerns, aggression, and withdrawal or clinging behavior.

- It is important that they be reassured that they did not do or say anything that caused the death.

10-11 Year Olds:

Children in this age group are usually able to understand that death is natural, inevitable and happens to all living things. They often react to death in a manner very similar to adults, using their parent's attitude as their model. A pet's death can trigger memories of previous losses of any kind, and this should always be open for discussion.

Adolescents:

This generalized age group reacts similarly to adults. However, the typical adolescent span of expression can range from apparent total lack of concern to hyper-emotional. One day they want to be treated like an adult, and the next day they need to be reassured like a young child. Peer approval is also very important. If friends are supportive, it is much easier for them to deal with a loss.

Young Adults:

The loss of a pet in this age group can be particularly hard. They may also have feelings of guilt for abandoning their pets when leaving home for college, work or marriage. There may have been a very close relationship with that pet since early childhood.

Due to geographical distances, they are often unable to return to the family home to say goodbye to the pet or participate in family rituals associated with the loss.

Questions That Children May Ask

Children may ask many questions upon the death of a pet. This may include why did he/she die? Where did he/she go? Will we see him/her again? Is he/she with God? Can he/she hear us?

It is best to answer questions as honestly as possible – but avoid giving too much detail with extra information. Young children, in particular, need only basic answers to satisfy their wonder. Your responses should also be based on your religious or philosophical views. It is also okay to say that you really don't know, but by all means, share your own personal thoughts, feelings and beliefs.

Involving Children In Memorializing Their Pets

Children, as well as adults, need to experience a final goodbye. Here are some ways to memorialize a pet

- Encourage children to express their grief by drawing pictures of their pet, and sharing what the pictures mean to them.
- Make a scrapbook or log with photos as well as drawn pictures of the pet and family members. Write memories beneath or beside them. Humorous instances should be included on the pages - which can help develop associations with happiness each time the book is opened. Other small items such as a dogtag, or small toy, can be included, as well as sympathy cards, and letters.
- If a pet has been cremated, a special place can be arranged in the home for the urn - as well as just a few pictures and mementos of the pet.
- If the ashes are to be scattered let the child feel he or she was part of the decision-making. It will be more meaningful if this is done at a place where the pet loved to go. Ask for suggestions about this. It is important that a child be made to feel that his or her thoughts and feelings are important to you.
- If a pet is to be buried, wrap the body in a shroud or casket that (preferably) a family member has made. That can also have an effect of closer bonding with the parents and family.
- Plant a living memorial, such as a tree or bush in memory of your pet. Making a small flowerbed in a spot that was favored by the pet, can also be a fine way to honor the pet and help bring closure to the grieving process.
- Placing a picture memorial with a written message to the pet on a grief website is another way of bringing peace of mind and comfort to everyone in the family. It assists with coming to some

sense of resolution, and accepting the transfer of the pet to a beloved memory. This can be especially helpful to children when they and their friends visit and honor their beloved one.

For Adults

As adult helpers and caregivers, we need to be mindful of our own loss history. Our early memories of pet loss may be punctuated with resentment due to a lack of factual information or parental preparation regarding a pet's death. Too often, we still have feelings that we were excluded from opportunities to say goodbye to a beloved animal, when we were children. In order to adequately support our children now, when they are facing the loss of a pet, we need to take the necessary steps to heal our own wounded hearts and mind.

Adult relationships with beloved companion animals tend to evoke our own more child-like qualities. And when we lose a pet we can be left feeling bereft, ourselves, longing for the very comfort that we now need to provide our children.

The loss of a pet can be a significant source of grief in a family. Indeed, it is the loss of a beloved member. That can lead to disorganization in family functioning, due to bereavement and changes in routines. New ones will have to be created, and it can be beneficial to discuss this. Children will need support to cope with the changes – as well as to understand the emotional impact on everyone, including their parents. It is important to show them it is good for families to react and grieve together.

A Few Memorial Websites

["I Miss My Pet: A workbook for children about pet loss"](#) by Katie Nurmi
© This workbook let's children work through the loss of a pet by teaching the child that their feelings are important and respected. They will also learn that respect for all living creatures is an important aspect of growing up.

World Animal Gifts

https://gifts.worldanimalprotection.us.org/celebrate-the-life-of-a-beloved-pet?gclid=CN6_2tTI880CFZaEaQod-agD1A

Critters – Create a Pet Memorial

<http://www.critters.com/>

Pets-Memories

<http://www.pets-memories.com/>

Childrens' Books

There are many excellent and heartwarming illustrated books for children, on the death of a beloved pet. Get some of these and read them along with your child.

All Pets Go to Heaven – Judy Helm Wright

https://www.amazon.com/dp/B00J0D707Y?ref_=cm_sw_r_kb_dp_3UPdx0VHXAE&tag=kpembed-20&linkCode=kpe

A long list of books from The Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement

<http://www.aplb.org/resources/books.php>

References:

http://www.aplb.org/support/children_and_pet_loss.php

<http://www.aplb.org/resources/books.php>

<http://kidshealth.org/en/parents/pet-death.html>