

Children and Pet Loss

The death of a pet is often a child's first experience with death and loss. Therefore, it is an important time for parents to teach children how to express grief in emotionally healthy ways, free of shame or embarrassment. Parents (and vets) can serve as valuable resources for children during these times. Assessing which children may need extra support during their pets' deaths can be difficult and it may be necessary to consult human health professionals who might include teachers, school counsellors, social workers, family therapists, members of the clergy, and counsellors or support group facilitators who specialise in pet loss.

Helpful Guidelines for Supporting Children Before, During, and After Pet Loss

- **Be as direct and honest as possible.** Avoid euphemisms like, "put to sleep" as these words can be frightening and confusing to children. Young children (under age four) have difficulty understanding the difference between sleep and death. Therefore, always answer questions as directly as possible and in an age appropriate manner. Use words like, "Fluffy has died," or "We will give Fluffy a drug that will stop her heart."
- **Don't lie to children about the circumstances surrounding pet loss.** Parents and vets should refrain from making up stories to "soften the blow." Telling children that their pet "ran away" or "went to live with friends" only substitutes one kind of pain for another. Children are then left feeling abandoned wondering why their pet ran away and believing that their pet doesn't love them anymore.
- **Involve children in decisions surrounding the pet's illness and death.** Children are often involved in the daily caretaking routines of their animals. It is only fair that they are included when the animal is ill or dying. Be alert to what child development experts call "magical thinking." Children mistakenly believe that they are somehow responsible for the things that happen in their lives, including their pet's illness or death. Let children know that the animal's illness or death is/was not their fault.

- **Allow involvement in the euthanasia process.** If children are well prepared for what will take place before, during, and after euthanasia **and** if they are given a choice about being present, they can attend the euthanasia. No child should ever be forced to be present, however.
- **Talk openly with children about how they perceive death.** Understanding the situation from the child's point of view is critical. Remember that children generally do not understand the permanence of death until age seven or eight and may need reassurance from adults. It is not uncommon for children to ask the same questions over and over again. It is also typical for children to ask seemingly morbid questions about body care issues as they do not have the same taboos as adults.
- **Involve children in good-bye ceremonies and in memorializing activities.** Each family member will have a different relationship with the family pet; therefore, it is critical that each person is encouraged to identify a meaningful way to say good-bye.
- **Children grieve just as intensely as adults do; they just do it in different ways.** Children don't usually possess the same verbal abilities adults for expressing their grief. Providing alternate routes for children's grief is very helpful (helping children complete drawings and poems, expressing emotions through play, and being actively involved in memorialization).
- **Act as a role model.** Adults often feel that they must shield children from the intense emotions that are a part of acute grief. However, a lack of adult response can create more confusion for children following a death. Allowing children to see their parents' emotions helps them understand that each member of the family is important and irreplaceable. It also gives children permission to express their own feelings openly.
- **Use resources.** When a child's pet dies, the adults who are significant to that child should be informed of the family's loss. Significant adults can provide a structure for additional support to the child. These adults generally include relatives, friends, neighbours, teachers, and school counsellors.
- **Discourage "replacement" of pets.** There is no right time for bringing a new pet into the family. Adults should sensitively explain

to children it is best not to rush into getting a new pet. It is important to take time to remember their friend that has died. Then, when most family members are ready to adopt a new pet, the timing is right to welcome a new pet into the family.

How children deal with pet loss depends on several key factors. These factors include:

- The child's age and level of cognitive and emotional maturity
- The role the pet played in the child's life
- Other events currently taking place in the child's life (parental divorce, recent move, illness, etc.)
- The role the child played (if any) in the death of the pet
- The child's personal loss history
- The child's ability to cope with crisis
- The circumstances surrounding the pet's death
- The parent(s)' confidence in assisting children with loss and grief
- And the quality and availability of other means of support

Useful Resources/Books

1. The Tenth Good Thing About Barney by Judith Viorst
2. For younger kids--"Dog Heaven" and "Cat Heaven" by Cynthia Rylant
3. "When a Pet Dies" Fred Rogers