

EIGHT WAYS TO HELP CHILDREN WITH PET LOSS

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The death of a family pet is often a child's first experience with death and loss. Therefore, it is an important time for parents to teach their children how to express grief in emotionally healthy ways free of shame or embarrassment. Parents and veterinarians can serve as valuable resources for children during these times.

The following guidelines are designed to help parents assist their children when a pet dies or euthanasia is anticipated:

- 1. 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 the age of 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 “Because Fluffy is sick or can't get better, we are going to help her die, because we love her.” Don't lie to children about the circumstances surrounding pet loss. Parents and veterinarians should refrain from making up stories to “soften the blow”. Telling a child that a pet “ran away” or “went to live with friends” only substitutes one kind of pain for another. The child is then left feeling abandoned, wondering why the pet ran away and believing that the pet doesn't love him/her anymore.
- 2. INVOLVE CHILDREN IN DECISIONS SURROUNDING THEIR PET'S DEATH.** Children are often involved in the daily caretaking routines of their pets. It is only fair that they are included when their animals are ill or dying. Be alert to what child development experts call “magical thinking”. Young children (ages 5-7) may believe that they are the cause of everything that happens in their lives, including a pet's illness or death (e.g. if they have ever said to themselves, “I wish Fluffy would die so I wouldn't have to walk her anymore.”). Let children know that the animal's illness or death is /was not their fault.
- 3. ALLOW INVOLVEMENT IN THE EUTHANASIA PROCESS.** Children should be well prepared for what will take place before, during and after euthanasia and should never be forced to be present. When given a choice to be present, children who are well prepared usually can handle the intense emotions and medical procedures that accompany euthanasia. Very young children do not have long attention spans and do not sustain their feelings of grief for long periods of time. If young children are going to be present, it's a good idea for parents to ask a friend to attend the euthanasia with the family, so the friend can take care of the young child. This allows parents and older children enough time to say good-bye.
- 4. 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, as they do not have the same taboos about this issue as adults do. *It cannot be emphasized enough that it is critical to answer all of a child's questions as honestly as possible without going into graphic detail.*
- 5. 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 everyone in the family be encouraged to find 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 as adults for expressing their grief. Providing alternate routes for children's grief can be very helpful (having children make drawings and poems, expressing emotions through play, and being actively involved in memorialization).

6. **ACT AS A ROLE MODEL.** Parents often feel that they must shield children from their own intense emotions that are a part of acute grief. However, a lack of adult response to a death can create more confusion for children. 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.
7. **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 might include relatives, neighbors, teachers, coaches, school counselors, social workers, family therapists, members of the clergy, and counselors or support group facilitators who specialize in pet loss. Even though social workers and family therapists may be highly qualified and skilled at what they do, they may not be trained to deal with grief, children or issues of pet loss. If a child is in need of additional support, find a human service professional skilled in these areas.
8. **DISCOURAGE "REPLACEMENT PETS."** There are no correct time limits for bringing a new pet into the family, but parents should sensitively explain to children that it might not be helpful to rush into getting a new pet. It is important to take time to remember their friend who has died and to have time to think about what kind of new pet they may want to add to their family. When most family members feel ready to adopt a new pet, children should be actively involved and included in the selection process.