



## A Helpful Guide for Supporting Children through Pet Loss

Losing a pet can impact the entire family, but it can be especially painful for children, since it is typically their first encounter with death. The relationship a child has with a companion animal determines the level of grief he or she will experience with the loss. Understanding the bond shared between children and their pets is the first major step in assisting them through the loss. Children require support and guidance to comprehend the loss and move forward in the grieving process while continuing to honor their pet's memory.

### Helping Children Cope with a Pet's Illness

- Discussions should be tailored to the child.
- Be straightforward and honest in all instances.
- Do not hide a pet's condition from children.
- Carefully plan to include all family members and discuss all options.
- Decisions about family pets should not be made in haste.
- Children should be allowed to ask questions.

### How to Prepare Children for Euthanasia

- Create an environment where a child feels safe to ask questions.
- Define euthanasia in the simplest of terms: a good death.
- Emphasize how euthanasia is a selfless and loving act of courage.
- Help children understand the need for euthanasia.
- Educate children what will occur before, during, and afterward.
- Explain the pet will die peacefully, without feeling hurt or scared.
- Avoid the common phrase, "put to sleep."
- Communicate about the physical changes that occur after death.
- Younger children require a clear explanation of death.



### **Should a Child be Present When a Pet is Euthanized?**

- Children are all unique and a parent knows the child best.
- The recommended age for a child is 10 years of age or older.
- If old enough, the child should be given the choice to attend.
- Children who do not wish to witness, may want to view the body.
- Having a final goodbye can help create a sense of closure.

### **Speaking Truthfully about a Sudden Loss of a Pet**

- Communicate with the child as soon as possible.
- Select a quiet and familiar setting to avoid distractions.
- Focus on the facts using simplistic language.
- Listen carefully and remain silent while the child processes the news.
- Openly discuss feelings, which will prompt a child to share as well.
- Allow the child to express as much grief he or she is experiencing.
- Respond to emotions with comfort and reassurance.
- Be patient and supportive throughout the entire process.

### **How to Explain Cremation and Burial to a Child**

- Keep the discussion at a level that matches the child's understanding.
- Follow the child's lead as you answer questions about cremation.
- Avoid using the words fire or burned in the details.
- Make it clear that the deceased pet is not hurt in the process.
- Describe how the pet will be sealed in a box and placed in the ground.
- Be prepared to answer questions on this topic at a later time.

### **The Healing Power of a Ritual**

- Holding a ceremony for a pet can be an important step in beginning to heal:
  - Reinforces the reality of the death.
  - Acknowledges the loss within the family.
  - Provides support from family and friends.
  - Offers the opportunity to express feelings of grief.
  - Encourages the sharing of memories that celebrate the life of the pet.
  - Serves as a means to provide closure after the loss.

### **Helping a Child to Honor and Preserve a Pet's Memory**

- Design a special gravestone.
- Create a paw print and save a lock of hair.
- Frame a portrait.
- Assemble a scrapbook or collage with photographs.
- Write a poem or short story about a pet.
- Plant a tree.
- Make a donation in your companion animal's name.
- Volunteer at an animal shelter.

### **Understanding Grief and Loss from a Child's Perspective**

- The death of a pet is often a child's first encounter with death.
- For most children, pet loss can be a deeply painful experience.
- As children mature, their knowledge base of death expands.
- Many children develop differently and it is crucial to follow their lead.
- Adults should be nurturing and empathetic regarding loss.

### **The Reality of Grief**

- Grief is a tribute to the remarkable relationship that was shared.
- There is no timetable for how long grief lasts.
- Children can fluctuate emotions from one day to the next.
- Grief is a personal and individual experience.
- When adults are open and honest, it helps children validate their own feelings.
- No one has the answers or responses to every situation.

### **What *Not* to Say to a Grieving Child**

- Your pet is in a better place.
- You can get another pet to replace the one you lost.
- I really know how you feel.
- Try to be strong at this time.
- Do not cry.
- You should be feeling better by now.
- It was just a pet.
- At least you have another pet.

### **What to Say to a Grieving Child**

- I am sorry.
- I care very much about you.
- I cannot imagine how difficult this must be for you.
- I would like to hear about your feelings.
- You shared many wonderful memories with (*pet's name*).
- Please tell me about your pet.
- What do you miss the most about your pet?
- I truly do not know what to say.

### **Supporting a Child after the Loss of a Companion Animal**

- Recognize that pet death is a significant loss for children.
- Emotional responses to a pet's death will vary depending on the relationship.
- Be available to listen and answer questions with care.
- Assure children they are not responsible for the pet's death.
- Encourage the child to express his or her feelings and share memories.
- Permit the child to talk about what it is like without his or her pet.
- Realize a child's reaction may be more intense with a sudden death.
- Enlist positive reinforcements by notifying relatives, friends, and teachers.
- Provide ongoing support weeks and months following the loss of the pet.

### **The Introduction of Self-Care**

- Choosing behaviors that balance the effects of emotional and physical stress:
  - Participate in a fun aerobic activity.
  - Eat healthy foods and stay hydrated.
  - Acquire adequate sleep.
  - Practice yoga or meditation.
  - Find a creative outlet.
  - Take a brief break from the sadness each day.
  - Reach out to a trusted relative or friend.
  - Turn to music as a source of comfort and strength.

### **Suggested Readings for Children and Families**

- *Jasper's Day* - Marjorie Blain Parker
- *The Day Tiger Rose Said Goodbye* - Jane Yolen
- *Dog Heaven* - Cynthia Rylant
- *Cat Heaven* - Cynthia Rylant
- *The 10<sup>th</sup> Best Thing About Barney* - Judith Viorst
- *A Special Place for Charlee: A Child's Companion Through Pet Loss* - Debby Morehead
- *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf: A Story of Life for All Ages* - Leo Buscaglia
- *I Will Always Love You* - Hans Wilhelm
- *The Goodbye Book* – Todd Parr
- *When a Pet Dies* - Fred Rogers
- *Children and Pet Loss: A Guide for Helping* – Marty Tousley
- *When Your Pet Dies: A Guide to Mourning, Remembering, and Healing* – Alan Wolfelt

### **When to Adopt Another Pet**

- Involving the entire family in the decision to adopt a pet is vital.
- Adopting a pet too quickly might deny the child's right to mourn.
- Children may take longer moving through the grieving process.
- The decision to adopt another pet does not represent disloyalty.
- Remember, the previous furry family member cannot be replaced.
- Do not expect the pet to become an instant member of the family.

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