

Explaining Pet Loss to Children

Our companion animals are often treasured members of the family, and we mourn for them when they die or are euthanized. It is important to recognize your feelings of loss and grief and to express them in your own way. In addition, when your child is attached to a pet that dies or is euthanized, it is important to recognize his or her feelings of loss and help your child express those feelings.

The Human–Animal Bond

The human–animal bond is increasingly recognized as a powerful and unique relationship. This bond offers much-needed comfort and companionship in our hectic lives, even improving our mood and blood pressure! When our beloved animals die or are euthanized, it is important to recognize our feelings of bereavement and to express them. Families often have a pet for a number of years, so children grow up with the pet as part of the family. Unfortunately, dogs and cats usually live for only 10 to 15 years and smaller animals usually live for fewer years, so a child may lose a few pets before

reaching adulthood. Recognizing the importance of the pet in your child's life and preparing your child for the loss are crucial to helping your child cope with grief.

What to Do

Children are often very attached to the family pet, so loss of a pet can be very traumatic for a child. Honesty is the best policy when explaining a pet's death to your child, but you should use language appropriate for your child's age. Your child wants to understand what happened, so use simple terms; however, do not say that the pet "was put to sleep" because your child may become afraid to sleep. Your child needs time to grieve and may want to memorialize the pet by making a scrapbook or having a memorial service. Talk with your veterinarian about obtaining your pet's ashes and burying them (if your municipality permits this). Ask about other memorials that your veterinarian may offer, such as making a paw print for a keepsake that your child may treasure. To help your child focus on happy memories, share funny stories about your pet and frame a picture of your child with your pet.

What to Do If Your Child's Pet Dies or Is Euthanized

- Honesty is the best policy when explaining a pet's death to your child, but use language appropriate for your child's age.
- Memorialize the pet by making a scrapbook or having a memorial service.
- Talk with your veterinarian about obtaining your pet's ashes and burying them.
- Ask your veterinarian about memorials that he or she may offer, such as making a paw print as a keepsake for your child.
- To help your child focus on happy memories, share funny stories about your pet and frame a picture of your child with your pet.

Seek Assistance

Talk with your veterinarian about ways to help your child cope. It may be helpful for your veterinarian to talk with your child. It is important for parents to inform school officials that their child has lost a pet. If your child shows behavioral changes or signs of depression, your child may need to talk with a professional counselor.

Many veterinary schools offer a pet-loss support hotline and support groups for small animal owners experiencing the loss of a pet. Several good sources of information on pet loss are available, including Argus Institute (for families and veterinary medicine) at the College of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences at Colorado State University (www.argusinstitute.colostate.edu).