



## Helping Children Cope with the Loss of Their Animal Companion

We've found that the death of a family pet is often a child's first experience with loss. Certainly, they are not immune to grief, however their age and development greatly influences their reactions to this loss.

Their expressions of sorrow are very different from those of adults –yet, it's important to remember that each child is unique. These guidelines are useful, but should not be strictly followed. After all, you know your child better than anyone, and should trust your own thinking.

### ***Children ages 1-2***

At this age, they do not understand death. Instead, they respond to their caregiver's emotions and behaviors. They may express grief as irritability, changes in sleep and eating patterns and quietness. For caregivers, supportive actions include continuing nurturing interactions and maintaining routines.

### ***Children 2-6***

For children at these ages, death is like sleeping. Death is temporary and perhaps reversible, not final, and the deceased pet can come back to life. Children may ask and repeat many questions, like:

- When will he be back?
- Where did he go?
- Who will feed him?

They may also believe that their own thinking can have realistic results. "I got mad at him and he died." It's important to let them know their thoughts are not that powerful.

Also at this stage, children can be very focused on the details of death, and are often very curious about the physical aspects of the dead body.

When telling children what happened, avoid euphemisms such as, "We had to put Buffy to sleep," "Buffy got sick and died," "God took Buffy to heaven," or "Buffy has gone away." All of these ways of describing death can be confusing to children and can cause them to fear going to sleep or getting sick, to fear or feel angry toward God, or to believe the pet will come back someday.

You might say something like this: "When he died, his body stopped working. He [couldn't] breathe, eat, hear, see, go to the bathroom, or play with his friends anymore."



They are very sensitive to their caregiver's emotions and behaviors. This is an opportunity for adults to model appropriate expression of feelings. This creates a sense of safety about experiencing emotions and expressing them appropriately.

- Maintaining schedules is important.
- Remember that children often process their emotions through play, so themes of death, dying and funerals may be displayed with toys.
- Parents and caregivers are encouraged to answer questions truthfully, using simple and appropriate language.

### ***Children 6-12***

Children in this age range begin to understand death as final. They may express curiosity about the physical and biological aspects of the deceased.

In the earlier years of this developmental phase, children may believe death is something that occurs to only the old, and only to other beings. Yet, at some point, an understanding that death can happen to anyone as well as themselves will arise, and fear of death may occur.

Children may believe that somehow they caused the death, perhaps by not taking care of or feeding the animal properly. You can gently correct these assumptions. Encourage children to play and act out what they think has happened to the animal and what they believe is going on with the animal physically and spiritually.

Acting out behaviors at home and at school may be exhibited. Social development is occurring so children may imitate how others around them respond to death or may hide their feelings in attempt to not appear "different". It is important for parents to continue to model appropriate behaviors and be honest and factual with children.

Often children cannot express or articulate what they are feeling with regard to grief, loss, and death. Sit with them while they draw pictures of their animal friend and tell their own stories of what it was like to live with the pet and how they feel now that the pet is gone.

### ***Teenagers***

These young adults are able to think abstractly about death. They understand it is the end of a physical life. At this age, they may struggle with needing support and not wanting it. It is important to help them find personal ways to express their grief, such as writing, drawing and talking.

Other tips on helping your child deal with the loss of a pet include:



- Involving your children in the animal's memorial service and rituals or in creating mementos to commemorate your pet's life. Tell your child what has been done with the animal's body.
- Don't be afraid to grieve in front of your child. When you mourn openly, you let your child know that it's okay to be sad, to cry, and to miss the family pet.
- If your child is grieving excessively, withdrawing, or acting out, don't hesitate to get professional help. A counselor who specializes in children's grieving can do wonders to help a child sort through his or her thoughts and emotions about a pet's death. A child therapist can also help the entire family deal with other issues that may be complicating their grief over the loss of a pet.
- Allow the grief process to take its natural course by not rushing into a new adoption. Wait a while before adopting another pet. Let your child have all the time he or she needs for mourning. If or when your child wants a new pet, explain the ways in which this new one may be different from your previous pet.
- Reminisce with the children about the pet. Use pictures, if possible. Associate positive, good events with the pet's memory. Emphasize that "as long as we remember and love that pet, he or she will always be part of us."

Ultimately we want to say that this is an important time for you to teach your children how to express grief in emotionally healthy ways, completely free of shame or embarrassment. These are significant lessons they will carry into adulthood.