



Ten Ways to Help Children With Pet Loss

Laurel Lagoni, M.S.

The death of your family pet may also be your children's first experience with loss and grief. It's an important time, then, for you to teach your children how to express their grief in ways that are emotionally healthy and free of shame or embarrassment. The following guidelines may help you provide support for your children when your family pet dies or when you know the death is coming soon:

- Be as direct and honest as possible. Avoid euphemisms like, "put to sleep" when discussing death because 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 "Because Fluffy is sick and can't get better, we're going to help her to die, because we love her and don't want her to suffer."
- Don't lie to children about the circumstances surrounding pet loss. Please refrain from making up stories to "soften the blow" for your children. Telling them that their pet "ran away" or "went to live with friends" only substitutes one kind of pain for another. For example, your children may believe their pet doesn't love them anymore and may feel abandoned. Feelings of rejection can be more damaging than grief!



(Photo from bigstockphoto.com)



(photo from istockphoto.com)

- Involve children in decisions surrounding your pet's illness and death. Children are often involved in the daily caretaking routines of their pets. It's only fair, then, that they be included when their animals are ill or dying. However, you should be alert to what child development experts call "magical thinking." For instance, young children (ages 5-7) may believe that they *cause* everything that happens in their lives, including their pet's illness or death. This may be especially true if they have ever said something like, "I wish Fluffy would die so I wouldn't have to walk her anymore!") Include your children and reassure them that the animal's illness or death is/was not their fault.
- Allow children to be involved with euthanasia. Children who wish to be present during a pet's euthanasia should be well prepared for what will take place before, during, and after the procedure, but should never be forced to be present. When given the choice to be present, children who are well prepared usually can handle the intense emotions and medical procedures that accompany the euthanasia. Be aware that very young children don't have long attention spans and don't sustain their feelings of grief for long periods of time. If your young children are going to be present, it's a good idea to ask a friend to attend the euthanasia with your family, so your friend can take care of your young children. This allows you and your older children undistracted time to say good-bye.

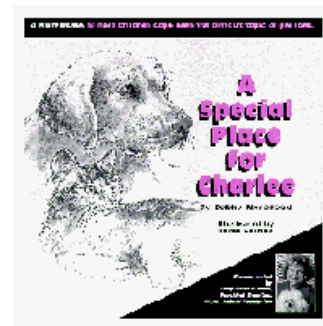
- Talk openly with children about how they perceive death. Understanding death from your children's point of view is critical. For instance, children generally don't understand the permanence of death until age seven or eight and may believe that a pet who has died will one day return. It's also not uncommon for very young children to ask the same questions over and over again or to ask seemingly morbid questions about body care, injuries, etc. Children simply don't have the same taboos about death that adults do. It's critical to answer all of your children's questions as honestly as possible, without going into too much graphic detail.
- Involve children in good-bye ceremonies and in memorializing activities. Each of your family members has a different relationship with your pet. Thus, it's critical that everyone in the family be encouraged to find a personal and meaningful way to say good-bye.



(ClayPaws® Kits available at www.veterinarywisdomforpetparents.com)

- 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 grief. Providing non-verbal ways for your children to express grief can be very helpful. For example, you might encourage your children to make drawings or to write poems; or you might encourage them to express their emotions through pretend play or to create a memorial for your pet that is unique and special to them.
- Be a positive role model. Like many parents, you may feel that you must shield your children from witnessing your own intense emotions during grief. However, failing to respond appropriately to a pet's death can create more confusion for children. Allowing children to see your emotions helps them understand that *all* family members are important and irreplaceable. It also gives children permission to openly and confidently express their own feelings.

- Use resources. When your family pet dies, any adult who is significant to your children should be informed of your family's loss. Significant adults can provide additional support for your children. These adults might include relatives, neighbors, teachers, coaches, school counselors, social workers, family therapists, day care providers, members of the clergy, or counselors or support group facilitators who specialize in pet loss. Be cautious about the mental health professionals you choose to assist your children. 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 your children are in need of additional support, find a human service professional who is skilled in supporting pet loss.



(A Special Place for Charlee and other children's books available at www.veterinarywisdomforpetparents.com)

- Discourage "replacement" of pets. There are no correct time limits for bringing a new pet into your family. As a parent, you can sensitively explain to your children that it might not be helpful to rush into getting a new pet. Explain that it's important to take time to remember your pet who has died and to have time to think about what kind of new pet you may all want to add to your family. This is an excellent time to help children learn to take time to grieve instead of attempting to "replace" their feelings of loss with another pet. When most family members feel ready to adopt a new pet, you and your children can be actively involved in the selection process together.

*Adapted from Morehead D., Lagoni L., et al. *Guidelines for Bond-Centered Practice*, 2001. (Out of print.)