

Parents and children – when a pet dies



Pet loss might be your child's first experience of losing a loved one. It is likely to be upsetting and confusing for them but if handled sensitively a child's experience of pet loss can help them to build positive strategies for coping with loss in later life.

For many years it was believed that children don't grieve at all or don't grieve with the same intensity as adults. This simply isn't true. Children may show their grief differently than most adults but it should never be assumed that children have some given resilience to loss.

The way that children view death often depends on their age but as children mature at individual rates this should be seen only as a guide.



- While very young children **up to the age of two years** may not have any or much concept of death they may notice the absence of the pet and will certainly notice the way that other family members are affected by the loss. This can increase clinginess and need for attention
- **Toddlers** may openly show their confusion, sadness and fear in displays of emotion. They may ask lots of questions and may have difficulty understanding that death is permanent
- Children between **the ages of five to eight years** are becoming curious about the world around them and it isn't unusual for them to become fascinated with dead animals. They may exaggerate details as they discuss the death of their pet with their friends. They may fantasise that death is something that can be prevented and may blame themselves or others for not preventing the death. The concept of euthanasia will likely be a huge struggle and it will take some careful explanation that the death is inevitable and that euthanasia will make the death less painful
- As **children of between nine to 12** start to understand that death happens to everyone and that it is permanent they can start to develop a wider anxiety about losing other members of their family. Children of this age can grieve deeply and intensely. They will need honest and direct answers to their questions
- **Children going through adolescence (11-16 years)** are already going through a time of great emotional development and confusion. They can often feel very close to their pets at a time when they may not feel understood or able to talk to adults in their lives. They may feel that their pet was the only one who understood them, or accepted them for who they are. Losing a pet in these circumstances can be devastating and boys especially may feel uncomfortable or embarrassed by the strength of their grief

Most parents having been through the loss of a pet have reported that honesty was the best policy for them with their children. 'White lies' may seem a good idea but often cause confusion and parents who have made white lies in an effort to protect the child from pain have often expressed their regret at doing so and had wished they had been more honest – even though it might have been more difficult at the time.

For children of all ages grief may be delayed and might surface days or weeks after the loss has occurred. This can be the result of busy schedules, peer pressure or emotional inhibitions.

It is common for children (and many adults) to worry about the dead pet being lonely or cold in their grave. This is a normal reaction and it may be useful to offer reassurance that when someone has died they are not able to feel lonely, cold, wet, hungry, thirsty or frightened.

Euthanasia

It is essential that a child never feels they are totally responsible for making their decision to have their pet euthanased (even if the pet was 'theirs'). An adult ultimately must have the personal responsibility for the death of the pet by euthanasia, never a child. However, if they want to be involved in the decision then this can be helpful as can being involved in the end of life care of the pet.

Talk about euthanasia in advance if possible. Providing a careful explanation of what happens in the euthanasia process may be helpful. Give honest but sensitive answers to their questions.

Memorialising

Memorialising can be useful for anyone losing a pet but for children it can have a lasting impact upon their experience of loss and grief as they grow into adults. There are lots of ways to memorialise a pet including: making a memory box, writing a poem, holding a

ceremony to say goodbye, having a painting commissioned of the pet. Involving your child in how to memorialise a deceased pet can be helpful.

Useful resources

There are many books available to buy that may be useful for children of different ages to understand and come to terms with the death of a pet. A search online will reveal many books for all ages with customer reviews to help you choose something suitable.

Reg Charity 203644 (England and Wales) and SC037711 (Scotland)



Need to talk to someone?

If you're experiencing the loss of a pet you can talk to us. Our volunteer listeners can provide you with emotional support and practical information at this difficult time.

Please get in touch, we're here and ready to listen.

t: 0800 024 9494
(9am–5pm, Mon–Fri)
free and confidential

