

EXPLAINING PET LOSS TO CHILDREN: SIX DO'S AND DON'TS

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PET LOSS&CHILDREN

Death and dying are two of the hardest facts of life to explain to children. Very often, the death of a family pet is a child's first encounter with this immutable law of nature. How we handle this event can have a far-reaching impact on our children's understanding of death and dying.

Eleven-year-old Maria, for instance, was used to greeting her cat Feifel every day after school. One day, he didn't appear. Maria and her mother found Feifel under a bed, breathing weakly. The veterinarian said Feifel had heart disease. He might be able to save him, but Feifel was 14 and suffered from several other age-related problems.

His quality of life would only grow worse. The most humane course to take was euthanasia. Later, her family held a memorial service, and Maria wrote poems about him.

AN INFORMAL GUIDE TO A CHILD'S PSYCHE

At 11, Maria understood euthanasia and the finality of death. It didn't make the grieving and sense of loss any easier, but she knew that all living things eventually die. After some time, she was able to remember her pet with more love than hurt.

But children younger than Maria often view their relationship with a pet as indefinite. They don't understand that animals run on a different biological clock, or that illness or injury may make euthanasia the best option.

At all ages, *honesty is the best policy*, says Marty Tously, a bereavement counselor. "That means using the words *death* and *dying*, and explaining the permanence of death. You do it gently but without confusing what dying actually means."

Tously is a counselor with the Pet Grief Support Service. She says that a child's ability to understand what death means depends on his/her emotional and cognitive development, but outlined the generally understood guideline of how children perceive death and dying:

Under 2: A child can feel and respond to a pet's death, based on the reaction of those around him or her. A child picks up the stress felt by family members, no matter what the cause.

2 to 5: The child will miss the animal as a playmate, but not necessarily as a love object. They will see death as a temporary state – something like the way leaves fall off a tree in fall but grow back in the spring. As they perceive the trauma around them, however, they may regress in their behavior (e.g., thumb sucking).

5 to 9: Children begin to perceive death as permanent, but they may indulge in "magical thinking," believing that death can be defied or bargained with. This is also the period when children recognize a correlation between what they think and what happens. For instance, a child may resent taking care of the pet and wish – however briefly – that the pet would die. If the pet then dies, the child is often consumed with guilt. Parents need to reassure children that they did not cause the pet's death.

10 and up: Children generally understand that all living things will eventually die, and that death is total. Understanding and accepting are two different things, however. They may go through the normal stages of grief that grownups do: denial, bargaining, anger, guilt, depression and acceptance. (To learn about the stages of grief, see the story *Coping with Pet Loss*.) Or they may react in other ways:

- Depending on the age, the child may regress (sucking their thumb or temper tantrums that they had outgrown).
- An older child may withdraw from friends and family for a while. Schoolwork may suffer and they may seem uninterested in extracurricular activities.
- Children may fear abandonment. If a pet can die, then they may reason that their parents could die as well.
- Children often become intensely curious about death and what happens to the body. They may ask for details that you may find uncomfortable to explain. These are questions you should answer in a straightforward, gentle and careful manner.

DO'S AND DON'TS

Tously explains that the worst course of action is to lie (to say the animal went away) or to use confusing euphemisms, such as the phrase “put to sleep.” Children will eventually learn the truth, and lying can breed resentment and destroy trust between parent and child. “Later in life, when the child learns the truth, they’ll wonder what else the parent lied about,” she says.

Likewise, euphemisms can cause anxiety or confusion because children take what you say literally. “If you say a pet is put to sleep, the child may suffer sleep anxiety,” says Tously. She recalls one child who was told his cocker spaniel just “went away.” He awaited his dog’s return, and upon learning the dog had been buried wanted to unearth the dog. “If you say ‘God has taken your pet because he was special,’ the child may resent God, and fear who might be next.”

- Be open and honest. This includes the pet’s health and euthanasia. “If a pet is terminally ill and needs to be euthanized,” Tously says, “the child needs to be told as soon as possible by the parent.” Again, avoid those tempting euphemisms that cloud understanding, such as telling a child the pet was put to sleep. Use the words *death* and *dying* to make your meaning clear.

Some children want to be present during euthanasia and most will be very curious about the process. Tously says you should answer their questions. As for allowing the child to be present, some veterinarians are firmly against it; others say it depends on the child’s age and maturity.

- Make sure the child understands what “dying” means. Explain that the animal’s body stopped working. Depending on your religious beliefs and what the child can understand, you might explain the concept of a soul. However, it is important for the child to know that the pet has died and will not be coming back.

- Be available to let your child discuss his/her feelings about what happened. You may want to hold your own service to memorialize the pet and to say goodbye formally. Some people plant trees in a special spot in the yard, others bury the pet in a cemetery so the family can visit. Encourage your child to show his/her feelings by talking or writing about the fun times they had with their pet.

- Show your own feelings. This tells the child that the pet was special and that they are not grieving alone. You can also encourage your child to open up, which can help the healing process.

- Tell your child’s teachers about the loss, so they will understand why your child is behaving differently.

- Don’t blame the veterinarian. Some parents, especially those who fear explaining euthanasia to their children, find it easier to lay it all on the vet. This is not only unfair to the veterinarian, but potentially harmful to the child. He or she may grow up distrusting veterinarians and, by extension, doctors and other medical professionals. In addition, parents shouldn’t throw the responsibility of telling the children what needs to be done on the veterinarian.

Your veterinarian can help the parent explain why euthanasia may be the most humane option, and answer questions the child may have.

Parents often want to ease their child's hurt by rushing out and buying another pet. Tousy says this is a mistake. "The last thing you want to do is convey the impression that the pet – a family member – is replaceable," she says. Wait until the child expresses an interest in another pet.

Children are very resilient, and they usually learn to accept their pet is gone. If a child persists with nightmares or seems unable to cope, however, it may be necessary to talk with a counselor.

WHERE TO TURN FOR HELP

Local shelters often hold workshops and support groups to help people after pet loss. Contact your local shelter for information. There are also a number of organizations dedicated to helping people cope around the country. To find one in your state, visit the Delta Society Web page at www.deltasociety.org/dsn701.htm