

Helping Your Child Cope With the Loss of a Pet

By Dr. Jenn Berman

Pet loss is often a child's first exposure to death. It is a sad and unfortunate moment for families, but a very teachable experience for kids. This type of loss is an opportunity for parents to:

- communicate about the death and life cycle
- show children that parents are an open resource and can be a great support during difficult times
- show them that they can tolerate intense and difficult emotions
- model how to cope with grief and loss

In her book *On Death and Dying*, Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross outlines the stages of grief and loss that both adults and children experience when dealing with death. Those stages are: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, however they aren't necessarily experienced in any particular order and you don't need to complete one stage before moving on to the next. It is quite common to experience one stage and then go back to another you had already gone through and thought you were done with. According to Cheri Ross, author of *Pet Loss and Children*, "Children are often unaware of deeper feelings that arise from a death and lack the understanding about how to integrate them into the process of grieving." As a result, sometimes there may be a delay in the expressed grief of children. Frequently, kids will internalize their feelings, acting them out in their own ways to process these complicated emotions.

Understanding Loss at Different Ages

As children get older their capacity to understand death grows and their understanding of the concepts behind it get more complex. Regardless of a child's age, however, they should always be told the truth about the health and/or death of a pet. This must be done in an age-appropriate manner that is sensitive to both the child's development and temperament. Typically children at the following ages can be expected to have the following understanding:

Under 3 years old- Children under three don't fully understand death; they only know that the animal is no longer there any more.

Preschool age- At this age, kids start to have a cursory understanding of death but often think that the pet will be able to return to them or will somehow "wake up." By about the age of five children tend to be very concrete thinkers and tend to focus on the specifics of what happens to the body after the animal dies.

Elementary school age- By this stage, children understand that death is final and that their pet is not coming back.

Tween and teen years- In their own search to understand the meaning of life they are more likely to ask spiritual questions. The loss of a pet can lead tween and teen kids to want to have a dialogue about what would happen to them if their parents were to die.

Regardless of a child's age, it is crucial that children are given honest information about their pet's fate. We know that the most severe symptoms of distress show up in children who are not informed about what is happening or has happened to their pets. Recently my cat of 16 years, Tai Chi, died and I had the experience of explaining death to my two-year-old daughters. Through my own life experiences, clinical work and research, here is what I recommend :

Death Do's

Use the accurate words like "die" and "death." Using the accurate words allows your child to know that you are comfortable discussing the issue and this more accurately reflects the truth of what has happened.

Talk about the life cycle. It is important to teach children about the life cycle long before the death of a loved one. Pointing out leaves, spiders or flowers that have died introduces the concept at an early point in your child's development.

Let your child see you cry.

Children learn how to grieve by watching our example. It is important that they get the message that feelings of grief and sadness are normal.



Read books to help them understand. There are many terrific books about pet loss. These books are particularly beneficial for younger children who integrate through repetition. In addition, these books allow kids to learn about how other children have dealt with loss and normalize their feelings.

Give your child a role to play in the death process, if possible. According to Ross, "Children who are given a role in the process, if only hugging the dog good-bye, feel important and significant within the family structure."

Have a funeral or memorial. A funeral is an important grief ritual that allows the whole family to, as a group, acknowledge the significance of the relationship and the loss they are experiencing.

Be prepared for the child to be concerned about other pets or people dying. The loss of a loved pet can bring up other loss-scenarios. Be prepared to answer questions about the eventual death of other family members.

Find ways to honor the memory of the pet. This sends a message to your child that we remember those that are important to us. You can commemorate an animal by putting up a framed photo, lighting a candle, creating a memorial in the backyard, drawing a picture or making a scrapbook.

Let the child use art and play to work through grief. Play is the way young children work through their feelings. Don't be surprised if your child repeatedly acts out a cat getting hit by a car with his dolls after he loses his cat in the same way.

Take into account other losses the child has experienced. Keep in mind that any new or unresolved losses – such as a divorce, moving to a new house, switching schools, the death of a grandparent – can make the death of a pet much more traumatic.

Death Don'ts

Don't use euphemisms. Statements like "he was put to sleep" or "we lost him" only confuse and scare children. If a young child believes sleep is related to death they are more likely to have sleep issues. If he thinks the animal is "lost" he will not understand why you don't just find him.

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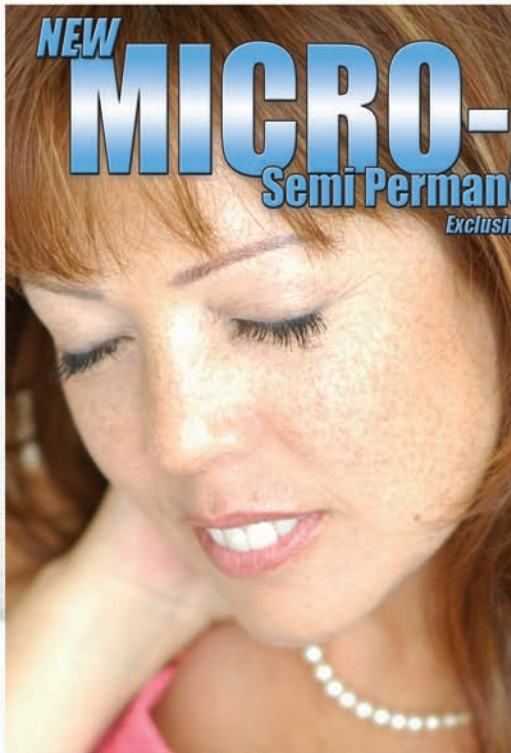
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Don't use the word "shot" when describing euthanasia. The idea that a shot could kill an animal will leave your child terrified at the next doctor's visit when she needs to get her shots.

Don't refer to the veterinarian as the "doctor." Once again young children worry that if the doctor can't help Fluffy, or worse yet, if Fluffy goes to the doctor and dies the same thing could happen to them. Always refer to the animal doctor as the "veterinarian" or the "vet."

Don't tell your child how to feel. Comments like: "don't be sad," "you shouldn't be angry," "be happy he is in heaven" don't help a child process her grief. It only confuses her and makes her feel bad for having her natural feelings.

Don't tell your child not to cry. It is heartbreaking to watch your child cry and you want to make them feel better, but telling him not to cry only makes things worse. Just let him get it out.

Don't lie. Telling your child that the dog went to live on a farm or replacing the goldfish before he finds out that she dies is a lie and denies the child the opportunity to learn about death. It also sends a message that adults are not to be trusted.

Don't make a child feel guilty about not taking better care of a pet. This still applies even if this neglect caused the pet's death. In addition, parents should never get an animal with the expectation that a child will take care of it. You wouldn't give your child a baby and expect him to take care of that, would you?

Don't give lengthily explanations about the death. Just answer the questions at hand. In our own anxiety to help, adults often have a tendency to overwhelm children with more information than they are asking for.

Don't downplay the pet death. A family dog or cat is often a child's first and best playmate, offering unconditional love and companionship. Don't underestimate the loss.

For a larger version of this article, including a list of recommended books, please go to www.familymagazinegroup.com/DrJenn