

EXPLAINING PET LOSS TO YOUR CHILD

It is natural to want to protect our children from painful experiences. Most adults, however, are surprised to find how well most children adjust to the death of a pet if they are prepared with honest, simple explanations. From a young age, children begin to understand the concept of death, even though they may be unaware of it at a conscious level.

When a pet is dying, it may be more difficult for a child to resolve the grief experienced if the child is not told the truth. Adults should avoid using terms like “put to sleep” when discussing euthanasia of a family pet. A child could misinterpret this common phrase, indicating the adult’s denial of death, and develop a terror of bedtime. Suggesting to a child that “God has taken” the pet might create conflict in the child, who could become angry at the higher power for cruelty toward a pet and the child.

Children are capable of understanding, each in their own way, that life must end for all living things. Support their grief by acknowledging their pain. The death of a pet can be an opportunity for a child to learn that adult caretakers can be relied upon to extend comfort and reassurance. It is an important opportunity to encourage a child to express his or her feelings.

Two- and Three-Year-Olds: Children who are two or three years old typically have no understanding of death. They often consider it a form of sleep. They should be told that their pet has died and will not return. Common reactions to this include temporary loss of speech and generalized distress. The two- or three-year-old should be reassured that the pet’s failure to return is unrelated to anything the child may have said or done. Typically, a child in this age range will readily accept another pet in place of the dead one.

Four-, Five-, and Six-Year-Olds: Children in this age range have some understanding of death but in a way that relates to a continued existence. The pet may be considered to be

living underground while continuing to eat, breathe, and play. Alternatively, it may be considered asleep. A return to life may be expected if the child views death as temporary. These children often feel that any anger they had for the pet may be responsible for its death. This view should be refuted because they may also translate this belief to the death of family members in the past. Some children also see death as contagious and begin to fear for their own death (or that of others) is imminent. They should be reassured that their death is not likely. Manifestations of grief often take the form of disturbances in bladder and bowel control, eating and sleeping. This is best managed by parent-child discussions that allow the child to express feelings and concerns. Several brief discussions are generally more productive than one or two prolonged sessions.

Seven-, Eight-, and Nine-Year-Olds: The irreversibility of death becomes real to these children. They usually do not personalize death, thinking it cannot happen to themselves. However, some children may develop concerns about death of their parents. They may become very curious about death and its implications. Parents should be ready to respond frankly and honestly to questions that may arise. Several manifestations of grief may occur in these children, including the development of school problems, learning problems, antisocial behavior, hypochondriacal concerns, or aggression. Additionally, withdrawal, over-attentiveness, or clinging behavior may be seen. Based on grief reactions to loss of parents or siblings, it is likely that the symptoms may not occur immediately but several weeks or months later.

Adolescents: Although this age group also reacts similarly to adults, many adolescents may exhibit various forms of denial. This usually takes the form of a lack of emotional display. Consequently, these young people may be experiencing sincere grief without any outward manifestations.