

WHEN YOUR PET DIES
HELPING YOUR CHILD THROUGH GRIEF
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As anyone who loved a pet and lost it, or put it out of its pain, or found it dead, knows the sadness that swells in your heart as you say goodbye is as painful as when a human loved one dies. For many children, the death of their pet is their first experience with grief. This emotional time deserves special attention as children can easily be upset by the event.

In their book, "How Do We Tell the Children", Dan Schaefer and Christine Lyons explain, "Children are people with a special way of seeing the world. They have unusual ideas about death and they are prone to certain misconceptions and difficulties with the subject at different ages. However, children can understand almost anything if it's put to them in the right way."

What is the right way? Experts agree, an honest approach is best. If your pet is injured or ill, it is important to prepare your child for the possibility that the pet may die. Young children are often keenly aware when a pet is not behaving in the usual manner. If your veterinarian is recommending that the pet be euthanized, the American Veterinary Medical Association recommends that each family member be allowed to express their feelings about the sick pet, even if the parents have already made the decision.

Children need to feel that their opinions have been considered. Your veterinarian can help explain the seriousness of the pet's condition to your child and in doing so provide reassurance as a respected authority.

Regardless of whether the pet is euthanized, killed in an accident or found dead, children need the opportunity to say goodbye forever. David Gutterman, PhD., coordinator of the "The New mourning Program: Growing through Grief", at Evanston, Illinois, explains, "Because pets are important attachment figures for children and adults, not to allow a child to say goodbye minimizes the importance of their relationship. Just like adults, they will be angry at the loss of the opportunity to say goodbye. This is also a wonderful occasion to teach children about the permanence of death and the rituals involved in saying goodbye."

Gutterman emphasizes the importance of explaining the pet's death in an age-appropriate manner. Children younger than 5 years old generally have difficulty understanding the finality of death. They may need several explanations, long after the pet has died, as to why he isn't coming back. This age group also takes language literally. Phrases such as "we are putting Boots to sleep" sends mixed messages. A child may develop problems going to sleep if they hear such phrases. It is better to say, "Boots died last night," or "Boots is going to die at the veterinarian's office."

Be as specific as possible in as simple a manner as possible when informing your child of death. One mother beautifully explained to her 4 year old son:

"You know Boots was very sick. Well, her body stopped working and she can't use it anymore. She died."

"Where is Boots?" he asked

"She is on the couch downstairs and she isn't moving anymore. She can't purr or lick herself, or eat or sleep. We aren't going to see her after today. Do you want to come and say goodbye to Boots with me?"

“Yes. Can I hold her?” he asked.

“Yes, honey. Let’s go say goodbye.”

Parents often wonder if the child should view the pet if it is disfigured from an accident. You might wrap the pet in a soft blanket covering the affected area and encourage the child to say goodbye. We often conjure images far worse than reality when we aren’t allowed to see the actual body.

The child’s relationship to the pet will determine whether or not they want to say goodbye or be present at the euthanization. The important thing is that they be given the opportunity to make their own choice. Too many parents choose to exclude their children from an event that is uncomfortable for them.

We hesitate, too, to cry in front of our children, for the fear of upsetting them more. Gutterman says, “It is OK to demonstrate your sadness when the pet dies, even if your child is very calm. By allowing our children to see us cry, we give them permission to express their own feelings. If parents do not express sadness over a sad event, they may contribute to a child questioning his or her own feelings.”

What should you do with the pet after your child says goodbye? Gutterman suggests the child should be part of a funeral rather than the pet just disappearing”. Children will quite naturally want to know what happens to the body next. Being a part of the event helps prepare children for other losses as adults.

If you bury your pet in your yard, check first with local authorities to make certain it is allowed. Children often become very upset if they think dirt may touch the pet’s body, so allow the child to choose a box for the burial. Including a favorite toy of their pet may complete the goodbye.

Where a backyard burial is not allowed or desired, the pet’s body can be cremated by a veterinarian. Again, it is important to allow for a final hug, pet or a glance goodbye. It is difficult for children, as well as adults, to jump back into daily routines while grieving. If the pet slept with the child, bedtimes may be especially sad. It may help to give the child a beautiful framed picture of the pet. Notifying your child’s teacher of the loss is strongly suggested.

Reactions towards the grieving for the pet may range from the family wanting to acquire another pet immediately to vowing never to go through the attachment process again. Gutterman cautions parents to resist the temptation to replace the treasured friend with a new pet too soon after death. This minimizes the loss of that specific pet. The new pet will never replace the one lost. It is an unfair burden for the new pet to take on. She is entitled to her own personality and should not be expected to behave like another. Giving children the time to say goodbye before they say hello again will help them make the distinction between pets.

It also sends the important message that you cannot replace a loved one. Help your child remember what she most adored about her pet. Keep her picture close at hand and talk about her. Your child may even like the idea of writing a story about her and drawing some illustrations. She deserves to be remembered as a part of the family and one of your child’s most wonderful friends.