

## Guiding Your Child Through the Loss of a Pet

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You just returned from the vet's office where they told you there was nothing more they can do for your dog and the time has come to put him down. You may be in shock, you may feel numb or maybe you've already been upset for days and this news is nearly unbearable. Moments later, one overwhelming question takes hold: "What am I going to say to my child?"

As a marriage and family therapist in private practice, I have helped many people deal with issues of grief and loss. The death of a beloved family pet is certainly a major life stressor. It is important to honor this event by giving it the time and attention that it requires in order for the family to heal. Here are some guidelines to help you and your child deal with this event.

**1. Communicate honestly and clearly.** Children need to be told what has happened or what will happen to their pet. Talk in clear, direct terms that do not create confusion. For example, many people use the term "put to sleep" in lieu of euthanasia. It is important to use direct language to describe what is happening so that the child does not misinterpret this information and think that when he goes to sleep he may die as well.

**2. Meet your child at their level of understanding.**

A two-year-old or three-year-old has no concept of the permanence of death. You may find yourself answering again and again the question about when the dog is coming home, whereas a ten-year-old can understand that their pet is not coming back.

Here are several books, geared to all age groups, that you can read with your child to



help encourage understanding and acceptance of death of pets:

*Pre-School and Early-Elementary-School Children:*

"When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death" Laurie Krasny Brown and Marc Brown (1998)

Through its bright and colorful illustrations and answers to direct questions such as "What does dead mean?" this book explains death in a way that engages pre-school children.

"Lifetimes" Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen (1983)

Beautifully illustrated, this simple book describes beginnings (birth), endings (death) and life in between as a natural cycle. Lifetimes that have been shortened due to special circumstances are described as well.

*Elementary-School Children:*

"Jasper's Day" Marjorie Blain Parker and Janet Wilson (2002).

This tender portrayal shows how Jasper's family prepares for the death of their terminally ill dog by deciding how they will spend their last day together before Jasper goes to the vet.

"The Accident" Carol Carrick (1976)

In this story a little boy grapples with his anger after his dog is run over by a truck. Reading this book together is a valuable way to allow your child to talk about his own feelings through the experience of the character.

"Mustard" Charlotte Graeber (1982)

Mustard is a cat who ages and eventually dies in this realistic and sensitive tale.

**3. Draw on your own traditions, beliefs and experience.** Do you believe in heaven or an afterlife? Have you experienced the death of a close relative recently?

Think about how you handled that loss and what worked for your family. Is a funeral or memorial service important to you? Ask your child what they would like to do with their pet's body. They may have strong opinions and wishes. Make sure you understand the regulations of your city before you agree to a burial in your backyard as many cities prohibit it. Many people who have experienced a death of a pet have memorialized their animals in some way be it a memorial service or by making donations to animal shelters in the pet's name,

**4. Allow your child to express their feelings about the loss.** This means taking the time to really listen to what they say or do. Often young children do not have the words or the ability to identify their feelings and may express their sadness as anger or hostility. Sometimes children will act out the death through their play, creating a mock death scene and burial using action figures, blocks or favorite toys. Make sure their teacher knows about the death as well. Teachers can be a great resource and support to your child at this difficult time, especially for elementary and pre-school children.

**5. Be a healthy role model for your child.** Children learn how to deal with death from watching their parents. Accept your grief as a normal reaction to death. Feel your feelings and experience the pain of the loss. A pet's death will inevitably stir up other losses that you have experienced in your life. Notice what happens for you. Talk about your feelings with people who are accepting and supportive of you. Don't change the subject if pain or grief comes up in a conversation. Get plenty of rest, eat well and get exercise.

**6. Move on.** Maybe it seems like yesterday that your family dog was curled up at your feet. Perhaps your child has been walking the neighbor's dog for many months and talks about having a new puppy, yet he sometimes shares his dreams or tears about your old pet. How do you know when it is the right time to adopt a new animal? To answer this question, I consulted Jill Winters of Cage Free Canine in Los Angeles. She is an animal rescue specialist who has placed many animals in new

homes. Winters says that timing for getting a new dog "depends on the person. We have no set rules about it." She reports that sometimes families with two pets seek a new companion for their remaining pet within two weeks after the other dies. "Sometimes," she adds "it's been years."

Your child and your family will be changed forever by the experience of the loss of your pet. Finding ways to incorporate that loss into the story of your lives will be a significant and healing process in grieving. However you choose to honor your pet's memory, do it with your child participating by your side.

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