

When a child loses a pet



Dogs, cats, rabbits, guinea pigs, birds, reptiles, sheep and all other kinds of animals in different shapes and sizes have a special place in the heart of the children in their lives.

Children of all ages love and grow very close to their pets. Pets are companions; give you courage; are a best friend; and will listen and always keep secrets. Unfortunately, for every child that has a pet, there will come a time that they must face the reality of the feelings of grief that come when their pet dies.

For a child, often the grief of losing a pet is as real as the grief felt when losing another loved one. This is often the first time that a child will have to deal with the very strong emotions that accompany grief. However, unlike most adults, children do not know to expect that they will encounter grief.

The grief of losing a pet may be accompanied by feelings of anger, despair, sadness, emptiness, longing, and in the case of younger children, confusion and a lack of understanding. As a parent, you may underestimate the impact that losing a pet can have for a child. Sometimes this

impact will be small, and may not last for long. For others, the impact may be big and may endure for the weeks and months that follow.

Children's grief

Children's understanding of death changes during different ages and stages of their life. Children often experience grief in waves that come and go. Some children may initially appear to be not affected by grief, and may become distressed later on.

Here is a little bit of information about how children experience grief at different times in their life:

Infants, toddlers & pre-schoolers:

- Infants and very young children are highly sensitive to the emotions of others around them. They may become distressed and unsettled when a parent, carer or sibling is distressed.
- Toddlers and preschoolers often do not understand the permanency of death and may believe their pet will return.
- Young children may repeatedly ask the same questions about where their pet is, what happened to them and when they are coming back.

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Primary school children:

- By the age of around 8 years, children are beginning to have a sense that death is permanent. When a pet dies this can cause them to feel anxious that they or others around them may die.
- Children may be able to talk about death without realising the grief and sadness that is associated with it.
- Children may feel fearful and as though the world is not a safe place.
- Children at this age may have 'magical thinking' and may believe that their own thoughts have somehow led to something bad happening to their loved one.

Adolescents:

- Pets can be very significant at this time, especially when there are changing peer relationships or difficulties at school.
- Adolescents may find that it is difficult to express their grief when a pet dies as they may feel embarrassed.

Talking

Talking to your child in an open and honest way about the death of their pet is very important. Try to avoid telling your child that their pet has 'gone away' somewhere, as this may be confusing for them. There is also the chance that your child will find out that their pet has died anyway - it is much better to hear this from you. This way, your child is more likely to feel that they can trust you and talk to you about their feelings if they need to.

Talk to your child in a caring and compassionate way and let them know that it is ok for them to feel sad, angry or confused about the death of their pet. Let your child know that you are there to answer their questions in an open and honest way.

Let them know that you also feel sad or upset that their pet has died, but that these feelings will pass and the normal routines of life will carry on.

Supporting

It is important for your child to know that you are there to support them through the difficult emotions that may arise when they are grieving the loss of a pet. Provide them with physical comfort, such as a cuddle, if they will accept it. Also give them the time and space to ask questions and talk to you about their feelings. Remember that strong emotions may come and go in waves and may last over the days, weeks and sometimes months to come.

Remembering

It can be very comforting for children to have some way to remember the pet they have lost. This may be by having a photo of their pet, doing a drawing of their pet, or having a ceremony at home to say goodbye. All of these activities can help to acknowledge the important role the pet has had in your child's life and that they are no longer there.

For more information:

Trauma & Grief Network: Supporting Families

www.tgn.anu.edu.au

Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss & Grief Network (ACATLGN)

www.earlytraumagriev.anu.edu.au

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