



Helping Children through Pet Loss

Often the loss of a pet is a child's first personal experience of death and as such, it offers you—the caregiver—a remarkable opportunity to shape the way they will deal with loss far into the future.

Ways to Help Include:

- Offer opportunities to talk about death and loss as they experience it in everyday life.
- Do not isolate or insulate child from grief.
- Include children in rituals whenever possible and appropriate.
- Share your expressions of sadness and pain.
- Continue to expect a child to function. Be firm, yet gentle and kind.
- Be patient and compassionate; the grieving process is sporadic and occurs over time.
- Be honest but do not give unnecessary details.
- Talk about feelings associated with grief. Let the child know that there is no one correct response when feeling grief.

A Grieving Child Needs:

- To be allowed to grieve
- To have their loss acknowledged and validated
- To know accurate information about the event
- An adult to listen to them carefully
- Support for overwhelming feelings
- Continuation of routine activities (rest, eating well, exercise, and extracurricular activities)
- Opportunities to remember

Understanding a Child's Grief Cycle:

Children grieve sporadically and every child's grief experience is unique and individual. They tend to work through grief rather than progress forward through the grief cycle. These are some common experiences:

- Shock and denial
- Protest and strong emotions
- Disorientation
- Deep sadness (hopelessness, fear of failure, aimlessness, irritability)
- Acceptance and/or adjustment

Responses to Loss from Younger Children:

How children react will depend on the level of closeness they felt with the pet, their age, and their prior experiences with death. Preschool-aged children do not understand that death is final and they may confuse death with sleep. They may also show greater interest in things that are dead. As children reach elementary school age, they begin to understand that death is final but this concept often creates more fear and sadness. Children in both age groups typically have difficulty expressing their feelings verbally because they either don't have the ability to do so or find that talking about death provokes too much anxiety.

Please note: Children will often display their feelings in their behaviour and play so it is important to be more watchful of how they act and what they do rather than what they say.

Responses to Loss from Adolescents:

As children get older, their responses to trauma begin to resemble those of adults but there may be some hints of childlike reactions. Their own personal histories with loss will contribute to how they respond. Most adolescents know that death is final and universal. They may not show their true feelings for fear of appearing weak or not in control of their emotions.

Some responses/feelings across both ages may include:

- Physical complaints such as headaches and stomach aches
- Separation anxiety (wanting to be close to parents or other loved ones more often/fear of being alone)
- Impulsive behavior
- Crankiness or irritability
- Tendency to argue, scream, fight
- Act like it never happened
- Confusion about why the pet died
- Blame themselves or others
- Poor concentration
- Aggressiveness and/or withdrawal
- Sleep disturbance and/or nightmares
- Appetite increase or decrease
- Decrease in energy level
- Shock and disbelief
- Indifference and/or depression
- Vulnerable and anxious
- Loneliness
- Anger and/or Sadness
- Abandonment and/or Isolation
- Guilt
- Fearfulness and/or Worry



Two Important Things to Remember

- As a parent or caregiver, it is important that you recognize your own needs and feelings, obtain support from other adults when you need it, and take good care of yourself.
- If you have particular concerns about the child's ability to cope, contact the school's staff for guidance.

Source

The Josh Rojas Foundation
<http://www.joshrojas.org/guidelines.asp>

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