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# Death of a Family Pet: Helping Young Children Cope With Grief

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Loss occurs on many levels, from something as small as losing a favorite toy to the death of a parent or sibling. Each loss is accompanied by a variety and range of emotions. Sadness, loneliness, fear, anxiety, guilt, anger, resentment, frustration, and, in some situations, a sense of relief all fall under the umbrella of *grieving*, which is most often triggered by the death of a loved one, including a family pet. In addition to grief, death brings change and threatens a child's comfort and security. Although adults want to protect children from painful experiences, eventually all children face the challenge of coping with death.

Losing a pet is a major trauma for children, even more than losing everything they own in a natural disaster such as a hurricane. A pet's death is often a child's first experience of being permanently separated from a living being he or she dearly loves. The death of a pet causes great pain and sadness. It also presents an opportunity for adults to listen, provide emotional support, and model and encourage healthy coping skills. This handout provides basic information parents can use to help young children cope with the death of a family pet.

## UNDERSTANDING AND RESPONDING TO LOSS

Children's understanding of death depends on their age, maturity, and previous experience with death. As a child watches others respond to death and participates in rituals and ceremonies, accepting and memorializing death becomes part of life. Although each child's grief is unique, all children face similar tasks of grieving (Worden, 1996): (a) accept that death and loss are real; (b) work through the pain of grief; (c) following change, adjust to the new environment; and (d) although never forgetting, place memories in their proper place and move on with daily living. These tasks are not completed one after the other, but come and go as new loss mixes with memories of previous loss.

Your pet was member of your family. Grief is a natural response to your pet's death. Children may be even more frightened, upset, and distressed if they saw their pet die in an accident or if their pet was sick, then euthanized. Increased trauma may cause nightmares and children may resist sleeping alone. These more extreme needs require additional support and extra reassurance, such as leaving the bathroom light on or placing a nightlight in the child's bedroom.

## HOW CAN I SUPPORT MY CHILD?

Parent support is critical to children's adjustment to the loss of a family pet.

### Listen

In their grief, children may believe this sadness will never end. Do not say, "I know exactly how you feel." No one knows exactly how another person feels. Show your support by listening and letting them know that you care. You might simply say, "This is very sad," and "You are not alone. I am here for you." Some children may not want to sit and talk about their pet's death. Be comfortable with their silence. Help them release emotion by walking, shooting baskets, drawing, playing with a stress ball, or molding play dough.

### Answer Questions

Younger children understand basic information. Adolescents understand what death means and want more details. Additionally, older children have more experience and place the pet's death in context with previous loss. Although it may be uncomfortable to talk about the pet's death, half-truths or avoiding the

topic are not helpful. When asked “How?” and “Why?” stick to the facts, avoid gory details, and explain in basic terms what happened to the pet. Use words such as *death*, *died*, and *stopped living*. Do not tell children that the pet *went to sleep* or *passed away*. They may worry that if they go to sleep, they may never wake up.

### **Address Possible Feelings of Guilt**

Although children may express sadness and grief in a variety of ways, watch for feelings of guilt. Children may worry about something they said or did prior to the pet’s death and feel responsible. Assure them that the pet’s death was not their fault.

### **Watch for Behavior Problems**

Children may not tell you what they need or how they feel. However, changes in behavior, particularly sleeping and eating, may indicate difficulty coping with the pet’s death. If behavior problems at school increase, talk with your child’s teacher and work together as a team. However, if behaviors are extreme or no improvement is noted over time, talk with your school psychologist. Particularly if your child talks about wanting to die or harm himself or herself, seek immediate help from a mental health professional. Suicidal talk must be taken seriously.

### **Provide Extra Support**

Spend extra time with your child. With some leeway, keep regular routines, providing extra comfort, reading favorite bedtime stories, playing relaxing music, and preparing nutritious meals. Accommodate for increased family and individual stress.

### **Seek Support to Strengthen Yourself**

Understand that no one knows all the answers. You may need support from your family and friends, your religious and spiritual leaders, and from school and community mental health professionals. Many websites and books provide helpful information (see Recommended Resources).

## **ACTIVITIES TO HELP CHILDREN COPE**

Parents can help children cope with the loss of a family pet through a variety of activities such as making posters, cards, and notes to honor the pet’s life. Activities should address your children’s needs at their maturity level and match their interests. Suggested activities include the following:

### **Plan a Funeral**

With your children’s help, plan a ceremony honoring the pet’s life. A program may include family members and friends sharing speeches, songs, poems, and stories.

### **Create a Scrapbook, Journal, Poem, or Song**

Make a picture album or journal. Point out that even though we will miss our pet, we will remember the good times we shared. If photos are not available, draw pictures or cut pictures from magazines. Help your children put their thoughts into words. You might also create or choose a song or poem for the pet. This can be incorporated into a journal or scrapbook.

### **Play “Remember When”**

This memory game can be played in the car or on the go. Start the game with “I remember when....” Then complete the sentence with a memory of your pet. The next person starts the same sentence, includes the first memory, then adds his or her memory. The third person starts again with the same sentence, includes the first and second memories, adds another memory, and so on.

### **Tell the Story About “Sea Glass”**

Tell children the following story:

The death of our pet hurts deep inside our heart. This pain, called grief, is very real. Our grief is like *sea glass*. When we drop a glass cup, it breaks into sharp pieces that can cut our skin. Did you know that when glass is first broken on the beach it is also sharp? However, sand and constant ocean waves change the sharp glass edges into smooth and rounded sea glass. With help and support, our grief will lose its sharp edge and become smooth. Our grief will not disappear, but becomes smooth around the edges (Heath & Sheen, 2005, p. 121).

### **Read a Book With Your Child**

After the death of a pet, children need to understand what death is and why their pet died. Even though adults want to help, they may feel uncomfortable talking about death and answering tough questions. Children’s picture books help open conversations. The Recommended Resources lists books for young children. However, these books can also provide support to older children, who may enjoy reading them with younger siblings, and for adults as well.

If your child is resistant to reading a story about a pet’s death, start with a book such as *How Are You Peeling: Foods with Moods* (Freymann & Elffers, 2000). Another option is to share a book with imaginary characters such as *When Dinosaurs Die* (Brown & Brown, 1996). These books make it easier to talk about feelings.

A carefully selected story about a pet’s death provides clear explanations and a safe place for

communication. Your child may relate to the characters' feelings and expressions. This, in turn, may prompt your child to express his or her feelings. A story you select should fit your child's level of understanding. It should also:

- Match your child's needs and interests
- Model healthy coping skills
- Reflect your family's values and beliefs
- Be written in your family's native language
- Clearly and accurately define death
- Portray a variety of feelings
- Offer ideas for coping with grief
- Give hope for the future

You can also ask a children's librarian to help you select appropriate books.

### REFERENCES

- Heath, M. A., & Sheen, D. (2005). *School-based crisis intervention: Preparing all personnel to assist*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Worden, J. W. (1996). *Children and grief*. New York: Guilford Press.

### RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

These readings and websites, specific to a pet's death, provide suggestions for parents and guardians to support children.

#### Print

- Brown, L. K., & Brown, M. T. (1996). *When dinosaurs die: A guide to understanding death*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co.
- Creech, S. (2001). *Love that dog*. New York: Harper Trophy.
- Demas, C. (2004). *Saying goodbye to LuLu*. New York: Little, Brown Young Readers.
- Freyman, S., & Elffers, J. (2000). *How are you peeling? Foods with moods*. New York: Scholastic.
- Kowalski, G. (2006). *Goodbye, friend*. Novato, CA: New World Library.

- Moore-Mallinos, J. (2005). *I remember* (English and Spanish). Hauppauge, NY: Barron's Educational Series.
- Rogers, F. (1988). *When a pet dies*. New York: Putnam Juvenile.
- Sife, W. (2006). *The loss of a pet*. Hoboken, NJ: Howell Book House.
- Varley, S. (1992). *Badger's parting gifts*. New York: Mulberry Books.
- Viorst, J. (1971). *The tenth good thing about Barney*. New York: Atheneum.
- Walz, J., & Russell, J. (2008). *Saying goodbye to Buddy: When a pet dies*. Seattle, WA: BookSurge Publishing.
- Wilhelm, H. (1985). *I'll always love you*. New York: Crown.
- Zagdanski, D. (2005). *When pets die: It's alright to grieve*. South Yarra, Australia: Michelle Anderson Publishing.

#### Online

American Veterinary Medical Association, *Pet loss* (brochure): [http://www.avma.org/animal\\_health/brochures/pet\\_loss/pet\\_loss\\_brochure.asp#formats](http://www.avma.org/animal_health/brochures/pet_loss/pet_loss_brochure.asp#formats)

Also available in Spanish.

Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement, *Children and pet loss*: <http://www.aplb.org/services/children.html>

Cornell University Veterinary Medicine, *Pet loss support*: <http://www.vet.cornell.edu/org/petloss/Resources/FAQ.htm>

New York Online Access to Heath, *Death of a pet*: <http://www.noah-health.org/en/mental/disorders/grieving/what/petdeath.html>

Also available in Spanish.

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