



After the Loss of My Pet - Questions and Answers for Parents of Grieving Children

When a family pet dies, children of different ages and maturity levels react differently. As a parent, it's hard to know just what to say or do. The following are some common questions about children and pet loss with answers that will help guide you in supporting your child during this difficult period.

Should parents be 100% open and honest when coming to illness or death of pets?

Yes, or at least as much as possible. This depends on the age of the child and their comprehension level. Parents should know their child well enough to anticipate their reaction, and to be able to explain a pet's death in such a way that is honest. Keeping a pet's death from a child will not allow the child to grieve along with the other family members. It will not really allow them closure and they may become confused or resentful if they eventually learn the truth.

How do different people at different ages grieve?

Again, this really depends on the emotional maturity of the child. Preschool children may be very accepting of a pet's death because they don't yet understand what it is. School age children may cry and need to be comforted and reassured or offer comfort to those around them. High school children may want to work through their grief alone.

Do infants-young children notice the missing pet or sense stress in the family?

Very young children may notice a pet's absence but don't connect or comprehend death. They may wonder why older members of the family are upset and may ask why and offer comfort, but not understand the big picture.

What kind of language should be used when talking to children?

When you explain a pet's death, depending on the child, you should try to be as realistic as they can understand. Older children may ask for specifics, younger children may simply understand 'Fluffy is in Heaven.' It's no longer recommended that you tell a small child that the pet was 'put to sleep' as this could cause problems with bedtimes or naptimes [for themselves or others]. Parents should be prepared for their child's reaction and able to accept and allow it. Talk to children as you normally would and remain honest. Death is something that children will experience over and over and should be treated as a natural part of life.

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What can kids do to express their feelings? Does a memorial service help with children and closure?

First, the things children can do to express their feelings are much like what adults do. Some children may even tell a parent they want to draw a picture of, or write a letter to Fluffy. Depending on the child, scrap booking, journaling, and even a memorial service may help. Ask your child what they want to do and respect their answer. You may also want hold a memorial service and allow children to talk about the pet and how they feel. Flower or rock gardens, and a memorial stone are often helpful family projects.

Are there certain guidelines or restrictions when dealing with religions?

Parents and families who have a strong religious belief may want to explain a pet's death from a spiritual standpoint. This is a parental decision based on their knowledge and belief in their particular faith.

What are some tips for buying a pet afterwards?

The best advice for getting a new pet is that every family member should be ready, even other pets in the household that will be sharing space with a new companion. It's not fair to get a new pet when others in the home are still grieving. Talking it over and making sure it's the right time is paramount.

Should children witness euthanasia?

This is another question that the parent can answer better than anyone. A child should be at an emotional maturity level where they understand exactly what euthanasia is and be willing to witness it. Never force a child or minimize the procedure. Also, you should talk to your veterinarian. They may have rules about children witnessing euthanasia.

Does sharing your own feelings and emotions with your child help?

This also depends on the child and how you share. Don't burden your child with your woes, but don't hide them, either. Children often sense when adults are upset and may want to comfort. If your child shares their feelings with you, first validate them and then tell them you feel the same way. Including children in the loss of a pet makes them feel like an important member of the family and one who can help in the healing process.

What else can I do?

Listening to your child will and being patient will be your best approach to helping them with their grief. There is no timeframe or methods when it comes to grief - for anyone - so don't expect it. However, if you notice your child not eating or isolating themselves or becoming hostile, you should consult your family doctor for guidance.

More Help

The Chance's Spot website has more information on Pet Loss and Grief including pet loss hotline numbers, an online support group, and message board. Please visit us at www.chanceSpot.org



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