

Kaleidoscope

Helping Children Grieve the Loss of a Pet

In most cases, pets are a major part of the family system. They are our confidants and our best friends. Unfortunately, the joy of owning a pet goes hand in hand with the heartbreak of losing one. While it's impossible to shelter our children from the loss of a pet, this can be an opportunity to help them cope with this major loss. And because a pet's death might be their first time losing a loved one, the grieving process can help kids learn how to cope with other losses throughout life.

Talking to a child about the death of a pet

When breaking this sad news to kids about the death of a pet, it is important to do so in a place where they feel safe and comfortable and are not easily distracted. As you would with any difficult issue, try to determine how much information they need to hear based on their age, maturity level, and life experience.

If your pet is old or has had a long illness, consider talking to your kids before the death happens. If your pet will be euthanized, the following examples may be helpful:

- The veterinarians have done everything they can do
- Your pet would never get better
- This is the kindest way to take the pet's pain away
- The pet will die peacefully, without feeling hurt or scared

Please be careful about saying the animal went "to sleep" or "got put to sleep." Younger children tend to take things literally and therefore this example may make sleep a scary experience.

Helping a child cope

Children experience a variety of emotions besides sadness after the death of a pet. They may feel a sense of loneliness, anger, frustration that the pet could not get better, or guilt about times they didn't care for the pet as promised. Help your child to understand that it's normal to feel all of these emotions and that it's okay if they do not want to talk at first, but that you are available when and if they are ready to talk.

It can be helpful in the grief process to find special ways to remember your pet. You might have a special ceremony to bury your pet or just share memories of fun times you had together. You could also incorporate a project like making a scrapbook.

Most importantly, talk about your pet openly, often and with love. Let your child know that the pain they feel will not be forever, but the happy memories of the pet will always remain.