

Explaining Pet Death To Children

"For many children, pet death is the first time they will experience grief over death. Handling a pet's death in a positive way empowers children to handle grief in the future," explains Julia Brannan, third-year veterinary student and student director of the Companion Animal Related Emotions (C.A.R.E.) Helpline at the University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine. "Being honest with children is the most important factor."

Terminology is crucial when talking to children about death. When explaining pet loss, use the words "death," "dead," "dying" instead of euphemisms. "These are all concrete words that children can wrap their brains around." Be clear because children's minds may extrapolate harmful connotations from sugar-coated explanations.

For example, a common euphemism for euthanasia is 'put to sleep.' Brannan cautions, "Children may begin to think that being 'put to sleep' at night can be an irreversible process." Brannan warns against telling children that your pet ran away or that you gave it to a friend. "That gives children a different kind of grief. They wonder why their best friend would abandon them or why their parents would want to separate them from a creature that meant so much to them," says Brannan. Instead, if you have made the decision to euthanize, she suggests saying the following: "Because we love Fluffy so much we do not want her to suffer. We are helping her to die because she is experiencing pain that we can no longer treat."

Talk about the death of a pet before the death occurs. Brannan suggests inviting your child to take part in the decision-making process. "Not including children in the process makes them feel completely powerless about what is going on with their pet." When deciding whether to facilitate the death of a terminally ill pet, talk honestly about options.

"Reading books about grief and pet loss to children opens the door for parents and children to talk about the possibility of losing their pet." Brannan's favorite children's books about pet loss and grief are the following:

The Tenth Good Thing about Barney by J. Viorst;

Talking About Death: A Dialogue Between Parents and Children by E. Grollman;

About Dying: An Open Family Book for Parents and Children Together by S.B. Stein.

Your local library or book store may have suggestions also.

If the decision is made to euthanize a pet, veterinarians can explain the medical aspects of death: how euthanasia is done, and how the pet will look in death--that eyes do not close, that the body may be warm for a few hours, and that the body will become stiff later. Veterinarians also can explain why a pet did not make it through a traumatic accident. In addition to medical questions, veterinarians can help parents deal with the child's

questions and grief. "Grief issues do not just happen in the clinic; they happen after the child leaves--months or sometimes years later," adds Brannan.

Parents often wonder if a child should be allowed to be with the pet during death and see the body after the pet is dead. Brannan suggests asking children what they want to do. If the parent or child does not feel the need to be present during the euthanasia, then an alternative is to go back into the room after the euthanasia procedure and say goodbye. Seeing that the pet is actually dead often helps give children and parents a sense of closure.

During the grieving process, family members at various age levels will react differently. Children under two can sense stress in the house even though they do not know the cause. Brannan suggests comforting them and paying extra attention to them during the grieving period. "Children 2 to 5 typically believe they are invincible," explains Brannan. Death is a reversible feat that cartoons like the roadrunner and coyote enact. Although they may not understand that their pet is dead, explaining death concretely now will help them understand it better later.

Eight-year-olds might understand that death is irreversible; however, in their minds, the universe revolves around them. "So if they think bad thoughts like, 'I don't want to walk Fluffy today. I wish she would just die' and then a couple months later, Fluffy does die; a child this age might believe that their bad thoughts caused the death of the pet," says Brannan.

Children may react in ways that adults wouldn't. They may draw pictures of their pet underground, bury dolls, or ask shocking questions about what is happening to their pet's body underground. All of these responses are normal and healthy.

Showing your own grief in front of your child is healthy as well. Hiding grief might make children wonder why you don't miss the presence of the pet in the house. This could lead to them wondering if you would be sad if they died. Grieving and crying in front of a child validates to the child that these emotions are OK to express.

Families can be creative about memorializing their pet. Plant a tree. Put an engraved stone in your cat's favorite spot in the house. Write a letter to your dog. Encourage children to draw pictures. Each family member should be encouraged to memorialize their pet's death in a way meaningful to them.

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