



Helping Children Cope with the Death of a Companion Animal

The death of a family pet is often the first experience with grief in children and teens. Naturally, kids develop strong attachments and bonds with companion animals, relating to them as siblings, playmates, confidants, and even protectors. Children need support and guidance to understand their loss, mourn, and find ways to remember their deceased loved one.

Strategies for Supporting Children

DO allow your child space to grieve in their own way. Children and teens will not grieve in the same way as an adult and should not be expected to. Be patient and open to discussion at any time.

DO NOT take over or push them. It's important to allow your child to lead their journey through the grief process. They will let you know when they are ready to talk, cry or show other emotions.

DO listen, without judgement, and encourage them to grieve. Be open to their questions as they explore their feelings. It is normal for "mood swings" in kids of all ages. Many young children don't understand that death is permanent thus needing to have multiple conversations about the same things.

DO NOT feel as if you must have all the answers; sometimes, just listening is enough. Be honest when you don't know something.

DO show emotion. Allow your child to see your sadness and tears too. Model grieving behavior in a healthy way, creating an environment where your child will feel safe and comfortable expressing theirs. Provide reassurance that your child is safe and will always be cared for.

DO NOT use euphemisms such as "put to sleep" or "left us" or "we lost Fluffy" as they only create confusion and unresolved feelings. Instead, respond with honest, simple, and direct language. Ex: "Fluffy died and won't be coming home."



DO maintain normal routines. When a child has consistent and predictable daily structure (mealtimes, bedtimes, daily activities), it reminds them that they are in a secure environment. If the death has created chaos, offer your child choices to restore a sense of control. Ex: involve your child in planning a memorial for their pet.

DO NOT expect your child to process the loss all at once. Kids process death in bits and pieces, over time. Children often mourn in doses and it's normal for them to have sadness and happiness spurts.

DO inform others of what's going on in your child's life. Ask neighbors, teachers, relatives and friends for extra support and understanding for your child right now and help in keeping a watchful eye on them during a difficult time.

No matter the age, children & teens will usually want to be given a chance to remember their pet. Decide how you'll honor your pet's life & keep his/her memory alive. Emphasis should be placed on the happy experiences that were shared by all.

Ways to Remember Your Pet

- ♥ Writing about or sharing memories
- ♥ Creating a journal, scrapbook, photo album or memory box
- ♥ Drawing/coloring pictures
- ♥ Making an ornament
- ♥ Painting the clay paw
- ♥ Reading a pet loss book/story
- ♥ Viewing videos of your pet
- ♥ Placing the cremains in a special area in the home with a lighted candle
- ♥ Planning a living memorial such as a tree or garden
- ♥ Filling out a memory book
- ♥ Celebrating the birthday of your pet
- ♥ Honoring the anniversary of your pet's death or other momentous days such as holidays

Developmental Stages & Grief

<p>1-3 years old</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♥ Can and do grieve but will not understand what death means ♥ May experience sleep disturbances, bowel/bladder changes, be hard to soothe ♥ Should be told the pet has died and will not return ♥ Choose familiar and supportive caregivers for reassurance ♥ Will typically accept a new pet very easily
<p>3-5 years old</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♥ Some understanding of death but do not understand that death is final (may believe it's reversible or the pet is asleep) ♥ May feel like they are responsible for the pet's death. Reassure them that they did not do or say anything to cause the pet to die ♥ Grief manifestations can include headaches, stomachaches, bowel or bladder disturbances as well as changes to eating, playing or sleeping ♥ Encourage expression of feelings through play, drawing or talking
<p>5-9 years old</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♥ Have difficulty imagining death on a personal level and may visualize an angel, skeleton or monster ♥ Expect questions and answer them directly; what info is being sought after ♥ May express anger at the pet for leaving them (let them know it's okay to feel angry or any emotion) ♥ Know death is irreversible and may bring up concerns about death of their parents or loved ones ♥ Grief manifestations can include school problems, anti-social behavior, physical ailments, aggression, or clinging behavior
<p>9-12 years old</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♥ Able to understand death is natural and happens to all living things ♥ May ask many questions and be curious about death ♥ Preteens tend to keep many of their feelings hidden but can articulate ♥ Interested in finding meaning and being a part of rituals and memorialization
<p>13+ years old</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♥ Adolescents may have behavioral reactions and attempt to mask emotions from all but their friends as they are preparing for parental separation soon ♥ Encourage and respect their opinions and suggestions for memorialization ♥ May need to correct distorted information about loss; be honest ♥ Model and rehearse adaptive ways to cope

Sources: aplb.org, vet.osu.edu, therapistaid.com, thepetlosscenter.com