



## CHILDREN'S RESPONSES DIFFER

Dealing with the loss of a pet is difficult at any age. When children are involved, parents must make sure the children understand what is happening and how to deal with the loss and subsequent grief.

Children handle the loss differently depending on their age, developmental level, and personality.

**Below age 3** • A child responds to the loss based on the reactions of family members and picks up the stress felt by others.

**Ages 3—5** • Children often see death as a temporary state and may miss the pet as a playmate. They feel the stress around them and may regress in their behavior.

“Very young children should be told that when a pet dies, it stops moving, doesn’t see or hear anymore and won’t wake up again.” (American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry)

**Ages 6—8** • Children begin to develop a more realistic understanding of the nature and consequences of death.

**Age 9 and above** • Children begin to understand that death is permanent and final.

## SOME PARENT RESOURCES

### Books to read with your child

- *The Berenstain Bears Lose a Friend* by Jan Berenstain
- *When a Pet Dies* by Fred Rogers
- *Jim’s Dog Muffin* by Miriam Cohen
- *Goodbye, Mousie* by Robie H. Harris
- *Remembering My Pet: A Kid’s Own Spiritual Remembering Workbook for Pet Loss*
- *The Tenth Good Thing about Barney* by Judith Viorst
- *A Dog Like Jack* by DyAnne DiSalvo-Ryan
- *Doggy Heaven’s in the Sky* by Lynn Barbarite, B.S., M.Ed.
- *Kitty Heaven’s in the Sky* by Lynn Barbarite, B.S., M.Ed.
- *The Dead Bird* by Margaret Wise Brown

### Resources for parents to read

- *Talking About Death: A Dialogue Between Parents and Children* by Earl Grollman
- *Children and Pet Loss: A Guide for Helping* by Marty Tousley, RN

Resources Used to Prepare this Pamphlet

1. Batts, James. *Death and Grief in the Family: Tips for Parents*, National Association of School Psychologists.
2. Crosby, Janet Tobiasen, DVM. *Age Appropriate Honesty is Best*, <<http://vetmedicine.about.com>>.
3. Crosby, Janet Tobiasen, DVM. *Stages of Grief and Resources to Help Cope with Loss of a Pet*.
4. *Helping Children Deal with the Death of a Pet*, <<http://dying.lovetoknow.com>>.
5. *Helping Children Deal with Loss, Death and Grief*, American Association of School Psychologists.
6. Lieber, Alex. *Explaining Pet Loss to Children: Six Do’s and Don’ts*, <[www.petplace.com](http://www.petplace.com)>.
7. Mader, Bonnie. *Coping with Pet Loss*, <[www.petplace.com](http://www.petplace.com)>.
8. Probst, Sarah. *Explaining Pet Death to Children*, <<http://vetmed.illinois.edu>>.
9. Stephens, Karen. *Ways to Help Children Cope When a Pet Dies*, Parenting Exchange, <<http://www.oh-pin.org>>.
10. Tousley, Marty. *Children and Pet Loss: A Guide for Helping*, <<http://www.griefhealing.com>>.
11. *When a Pet Dies*, American Association of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, <<http://www.aacap.org>>.

## EXPLAINING THE DEATH OF A PET TO A CHILD



For additional resources, please contact the children’s librarian at your local public library or your child’s school, or ask your veterinarian.



Pamphlet provided by  
The Kennel Club of  
Fort Atkinson  
920-568-0364  
[www.kcfadogs.org](http://www.kcfadogs.org)

## HELPING YOUR CHILD DEAL WITH THE LOSS OF A PET

According to the Companion Animal Related Emotions program, “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.”

**Words to use •** Use words such as “death,” “dead,” and “dying.” These are concrete words children can understand. If you use terms such as “put to sleep” or “the dog ran away,” these words can create a fear of going to sleep at night or a sense of abandonment.

**When to talk to your child •** It is best, if possible, to talk about the death of a pet before the death occurs. If your pet is going to be euthanized, it is helpful to have your child be part of the decision process.

**How to talk to your child •** If you must tell your child that a pet has died, talk to them in a comfortable way. Use a soothing voice, hold their hand, or put your arm around them. Be honest in telling them that their pet died.

**Answer questions honestly •** Always ask if they have questions and encourage them to express what they are feeling. Be prepared for questions like, “Why did my pet die?” “Is it my fault?” “Will I ever see my pet again?” “Where does my pet’s body go?” Answer simply, but honestly.

**Don’t be afraid to express your own feelings of loss •** Let your child know that sadness is normal after experiencing a loss. Children learn by watching how the adults in their lives handle the grief of losing a pet.



**Tell your child’s teacher •** Be sure to share the loss with your child’s teachers so they will be aware of differences in behavior.

**Do not blame the veterinarian •** Help your child to understand that your pet health care professional was helping your pet.

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## WATCHING FOR SIGNS OF PROLONGED SADNESS

Sometimes children take longer than adults to recover from a loss. There may be a time of sadness, depression, or acting out, but this should go away in a reasonable period of time. It is advisable to seek additional help from a counselor or minister if your child shows prolonged grief. Some warning signs to watch for are:

- Disinterest in usual activities
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Loss of appetite
- Bedwetting or regression in potty training
- Fear of being alone
- Nightmares or fear of going to sleep
- Preoccupation with thoughts of death

## MOVING FROM LOSS TO HEALING

**Deciding you want to feel better •** It is healthy to want to feel better. Feeling better does not mean that you are forgetting your pet and will never take away from the relationship you had with your pet. You can help your child as you move toward healing together.

**Remembering your pet •** Encourage your child to create something to honor your deceased pet—a poem, a scrapbook, an album, a memorial at the burial site, or a picture. Let them donate the pet’s food to a local shelter or make a bracelet out of the pet’s collar.

**Providing closure •** Recognize the significance of the pet’s life and its place in your home. Help your child to reach closure by holding a memorial service or other ceremony. Let your child participate in a way that seems meaningful and appropriate.

**Using available resources •** There are a number of books and other resources to help you talk to your child and provide assistance during the period of loss. Also, do not be afraid to ask your veterinarian for help.

**Getting another pet •** It is a personal choice when to get another pet. It is critical that your child understands that a new pet does NOT replace the other. Do not push a new pet on your child, but listen to your child’s responses and interest in getting a pet.

**Caring for surviving pets •** Don’t forget to pay extra attention to surviving pets. Pets often develop a bond with other animals in the home and when that bond is broken, they need consolation, too.