

Helping Your Child Through Pet Loss

How do I talk to my child about death or the end of life stage?

At the end of a beloved pet's life, adults may assume that children do not understand loss. They may believe that we should shelter them from death, be tempted to explain the death of a pet in vague ways, or avoid the topic altogether. Research shows this is not the best approach for children, often causing anxiety and confusion. Simply put, children need clarity.

Children experience grief differently than adults, but going through the process of loss and grieving with a loving family who is open and honest can ease the process. Oftentimes, children have a strong attachment or connection to their pets. They are their playmates, companions, and friends, just like adults. In order to understand loss, they need a parent's guidance and support. In most cases, the end of life stage or death of a beloved pet and how it is handled will remain with a child throughout his or her life.

Normally, a child's reaction to a pet's end of life is natural, varied and curious. By including your child in the rituals surrounding grief, memorializing the pet, and working through their sadness, you're teaching them lifelong coping mechanisms. Additionally, one of the best things you can do is remind your child that it is normal to mourn and remember their pet.

How can I help my child with this loss?

- Be open to talking about the pet. Don't discourage your child from reminiscing about your pet or hide your feelings about this loss.
- Get them something tangible. Death is so intangible to children and oftentimes the loss of a pet is their first experience with loss. Giving your child something physical to remember their beloved pet with will help them cope and heal. Whether it is the ashes in an urn, a clay paw print, a special necklace for your child, or a framed photo or drawing of the pet.
- Involve their teachers/coaches. It's helpful to let your child's teachers and coaches know what is going on, so they can be prepared for any uncharacteristic behaviors your child may exhibit during this time.
- Allow your child to move on. If and when the time is right to add another furry friend to your family, encourage your child to love them without the fear of a future loss.

Questions Your Child May Ask

If your child wants to be at their pet's euthanasia appointment, allow them to decide their level of involvement.

As adults, we have learned to delicately discuss death with words like "passing" or "put to sleep," but children have not learned this yet. Surprisingly, it's best to use concrete terms, including "death" and "died," when discussing your pet with your child.

After this, your child may be abrupt or seem insensitive in their comments, questions, and discussions surrounding death. This is developmentally appropriate for young children, as they do not fully understand death or its permanence. They may be very "matter-of-fact," which can seem disconcerting and unfamiliar compared to the guarded conversations adults have about loss.

They may ask questions, including—

- Why did my pet die?
- Is it my fault?
- What happens to my pet's body when he/she dies?
- Where does my pet go when he/she dies?
- Does my pet have a soul?
- What happens when you (parents) die?
- Will I die?
- Who will take care of me when you die?

These questions, along with many others may seem uncomfortable. It's OK to not have all the answers. On the other hand, some may be surprised to find that their child may not show the same level of sadness as them. This apathy does not mean they aren't sad or they didn't love your pet. It means that their mind does not process the permanence of death like an adult.



Helping Your Child Through Pet Loss (continued)

Should my child be present at the home euthanasia appointment?

The reality is, as much as we want to protect our children from death and grief, they will experience it in their lifetime. Setting an example for what healthy grieving looks like, as well as being open to talking about death, can help demystify and remove the fearfulness that death and loss can bring. Allowing them to experience big emotions, especially from the loss of someone we love is healthy.

How your child reacts to the loss of their pet will depend upon their age and development:

- Children three to five years old may not understand that death is permanent and not reversible.
- Children six to eight are beginning to understand the consequences of death.
- In most cases, children do not understand that death is permanent and final until they are nine years old.

Young children may ultimately be distracting to your final time with your pet as they may be confused as to why their family members are upset. For older children, it's a good idea to ask them if they want to be at the euthanasia appointment and chances are they will tell you. If they don't want to be there, that's ok. Set a special time for them to say goodbye and draw a picture for their pet if they wish.

If they do want to be there, we encourage them to take the lead in how much or little they want to be present and involved in the appointment.

Prior to the appointment, be sure to discuss where they will go if they decide to leave before the appointment is done. Create and establish a safe space for them to settle so that you can remain with your pet the entire time, even if they choose not to.

My child is going to be present at the home euthanasia appointment, now what?

Family members should always be welcome at home euthanasia appointments, and children are no exception. If your child is going to be present at the appointment, we have a few tips to help them through it —

- Talk with them beforehand. Give them clear expectations about what is going to happen at the appointment, including discussing the injections and process. Answer any questions they may have clearly and concisely.
- Get them involved in the appointment. Follow their lead and encourage them to pet, kiss, and speak to their pet throughout the appointment. Allow them the chance to say goodbye.
- Give them a job. Many parents allow their children to be involved prior to or during the appointment by allowing their children to pick their pet's "last meal." This is a great distraction for your pet during the sedating injection, and a sweet memory to involve your children in your pet's crossing over. Encourage your child to pick something they think their pet would like — it can be anything from cream cheese to steak to ice cream— and allow them to share it with their pet during the appointment.
- Be open to their expressions of grief. Your child may reflect the level of sadness they see you demonstrate. They may seem significantly more affected than you, or significantly less. However your child reacts, use this experience as an opportunity to teach about managing emotions in a healthy way, even feelings of grief and sadness.

