



Veterinary Wisdom®

For Pet Parents

Five Ways to Help Children when a Pet Dies

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Your pet's death may be your children's first experience with loss and feelings of grief. The experience of pet loss presents an opportunity for you to teach your children to express grief in emotionally healthy ways, free of shame or embarrassment.

Research and clinical experience suggest children can learn and grow from the experience of grief if the adults in their lives follow a few key guidelines:

- **Be as honest as possible**
It's tempting to try to protect children from any kind of emotional pain. Yet, attempting to "soften the blow" by telling children that a pet 'ran away' or 'went to live with someone else' only creates a different kind of pain. Losing a pet under any circumstances will cause children to grieve and thinking that a family pet ran away may add feelings of abandonment and rejection.
- **Encourage children to view a pet's body and to say good-bye**
If a pet dies suddenly, it can be beneficial for your child to see the pet's body and be able to say good-bye in whatever way they are comfortable. This may include touching the pet, holding and hugging the pet, and even spending time alone with the pet's body. Depending on where the pet's death occurs, either you or your veterinarian can clean the pet's fur of any blood, remove any medical equipment or supplies (catheters, tape, etc.) and position the body so it is soothing to see, perhaps curled into a pet bed or nestled into a container that has been lined with a soft blanket.
- **Involve children in the euthanasia process**
The key to a comforting good-bye process for children is how well they are prepared to face their pet's death. Speak with your veterinarian before your pet is euthanized so you are well informed about the procedures your child will witness and about the level of emotional support you and your child can expect to receive.

Children who are well prepared can usually handle the intense emotions that are part of euthanasia. And research, along with clinical experience, shows that it is beneficial for children to say a personal good-bye to a loved one who has died.
- **Allow children to make their own choices**
Children should always be allowed to make their own choices about how much they wish to be involved with the process of saying good-bye to a pet. Older children may choose to be with a pet when the euthanasia is performed, while younger

children may choose to say good-bye while their pet is still alive. Other children may choose to view a pet's body only after death has occurred, reassuring themselves that their beloved pet has really died.

Very young children don't really understand death and have short attention spans. If your young child wants to be included, it's a good idea to ask a friend to be with your family when your pet dies, so he or she can take care of your child. This allows you and your older children uninterrupted time to say your own good-byes.

- **Allow time for grief**

As a caring parent, it may be tempting for you to try to "cheer up" your grieving children by immediately adopting a new pet. Sometimes this works. Many children are able to bond with a new pet and grieve for the one who died at the same time.

Yet, while there's no "right" time to adopt a new pet, be sure your children don't get the message that a family member who dies is easily replaceable. Grieving is normal, natural, and healing. And grieving is a way to honor the impact of a pet's life on your own.

Since children have shorter attention spans than adults and because they express their grief differently, be aware that your children may grieve the loss in "short bursts". Children are unable to sustain intense grief emotions for long periods of time. Therefore, it is normal for children to go from crying and being very upset one minute, to wanting to go and play the next. This is not a sign of indifference or poor coping; it is simply the way in which they need to work through their grief.

While adopting a new pet may help your whole family feel better, grieving together can also bring you closer together. Then, when everyone feels ready, a new pet can join you and find his or her own joyful place in your family.



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