

Pet Loss and Children

Many people do not realize how traumatic and confusing death can be on a child. Although children tend to grieve for shorter periods of time, their grief is no less intense than that experienced by adults. Children also tend to come back to the subject repeatedly; so extreme patience is required when dealing with the grieving child. Some helpful tips for helping the grieving child include:

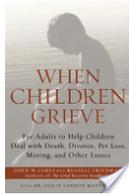
Giving the child permission to work through their grief.

1. Encourage the child to talk freely about the pet. Give the child plenty of hugs and reassurance - discuss death, dying and grief honestly. **Let your child see you express your own grief at the loss of the pet.** If you don't experience the same sense of loss as your child, respect their grief and let them express their feelings openly, without making them feel ashamed or guilty. Children should feel proud that they have so much compassion and care deeply about their animal companions. Do not use your child as your main emotional support person in your time of grief. Be sure you have your own support people.
2. Reassure your child that they weren't responsible for the pet's death. The death of a pet can raise a lot of questions and fears in a child. You may need to reassure your child that you, their parents, are not also likely to die. It's important to talk about all their feelings and concerns.
3. If possible, give the child an opportunity to create a memento of the pet. This could be a special photograph, or a plaster cast of the animal's paw print, a scrapbook or picture for the refrigerator. **Allow the child to be involved in any memorial service, if they desire.** Holding a funeral or creating a memorial for the pet can help your child express their feelings openly and help process the loss. This can also be done on the anniversary of the death if at the time of the death emotions were too high.
4. After the death of a pet, it's advisable to let some of the other adults in your child, or children's, life know, to be aware that this has happened and that your child may be needing some addition attention or maybe acting out in different ways. You can do this in the form of writing a short note to teachers, coaches, scout leaders, religious instructors. You can call them on the phone or let them know in person. The reason that this is advisable is that sometimes children are not going to show a lot of distress at home. They may not be talking to you about it. You may wonder if it is bothering them at all. Or it

could be that some of those behaviors or emotions are going to be more manifesting in a different setting outside of the home. It is very important to let other people, other adults know that are interacting with your child, that there could be some emotional distress displayed and to let you know.

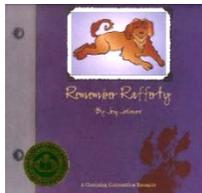
5. Depending on your child's developmental age they will respond differently and they will ask different questions.
 - a. How to Explain Pet Euthanasia to a Child - Explain that the pet is ill, often suffering, and that you have the ability to end that suffering in a very humane and gentle way. It is a simple injection, very peaceful and painless, and if you really love a pet you have to make these kinds of difficult decisions. Children tend to feed off of how their parents react. If a parent is hysterical, the children will be the same. If the parents are truly sad, and deal with the sadness in a healthy and thoughtful manner, the children will follow their example. You should feel sad, and your children can feel the sadness, but don't mix guilt in with the sadness. One emotion is healthy, the other terribly burdensome.
6. NEVER tell a child not to cry or to stop crying.
7. NEVER say things like "God took your pet," or the pet was "put to sleep or ran away." The child will learn to fear that God will take them, their parents or their siblings - The child will become afraid of going to sleep. Include the child in everything that is going on. Explain the permanency of death and that death is a part of the life cycle.
8. There are a lot of wonderful children's books about grief and loss (see last page of this article). A book experiencing its 20th anniversary is called "Freddy the Leaf". It goes through Freddy's life, through the seasons and eventually until we get to the winter and Freddy's eventual falling off the tree. So it's actually a very beautifully written depiction about the life cycle. It helps children to be thinking about questions, about the cycle of life and death part in it. There are wonderful books that can stimulate those kinds of conversations with your children. Also, helping adults to be able to better help their children, so there is a wealth of information out there if you check at your local library or book store.
9. Do not rush out to get the child a "replacement pet" before they have had chance to grieve the loss they feel. Your child may feel disloyal, or you could send the message that the grief and sadness felt when something dies can simply be overcome by buying a replacement.

Books to Help Yourself and Your Children



When Children Grieve: For Adults to Help Children Deal with Death, Divorce, Pet Loss, Moving, and Other Losses

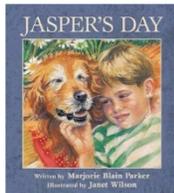
John W. James (2001)



Remember Rafferty: Pet Loss for Children

Joy Johnson (1998)

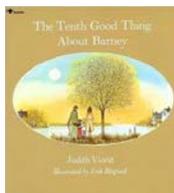
This book is for children after a pet has died.



Jasper's Day

Marjorie Blain Parker (1983)

This book is for children as you prepare to make the decision to euthanize your beloved pet but can be read after to deal with feelings.



The Tenth Good Thing About Barney

Judith Vorist (1987)

This book helps children and adults with ways to remember their pets in order to help themselves heal.



Saying Good-Bye to LuLu

Corinne Demas (2004)

This books helps children say farewell to their pet that has died and prepare for their new one.



Jim's Dog Muffin

Miriam Cohen (1984)

This book helps children and adults whose animal was struck and killed by a vehicle. It remains a classic.