

Helping Children Cope with the Serious Illness or Death of a Companion Animal

Honoring the Bond

Should Children be Informed?

YES! Learning to accept illness, injury or death is a natural experience in life. It is important that children have the opportunity to participate in family discussions of these issues. Being involved in the decision-making and treatment process of a family pet that is seriously ill or injured may provide valuable lessons for children about responsibility, compassion, commitment and coping.

WHY? When a companion animal is ill, parents often try to hide worry and anxiety from their children. This protection philosophy can backfire. If children do not find out the information they need from you, they may seek other, less reliable, sources of support. Each time a child inquires and is denied adequate information, they delve into their own imagination or memory to create an answer. The longer such misinformation exists, the more difficult it is to correct. Because of the anxiety and fear created by not talking with children about serious issues that impact the family, children may experience adverse emotional reactions. They may become angry, hoping that their tantrums will restore normality. They may neglect playing and eating because of guilt—not realizing that their own actions had nothing to do with the illness, injury or death of their companion animal. Involving children throughout the process will most likely alleviate fears and anxieties.

HOW? Each child is a unique individual and your discussions will be based on a variety of factors, including age, development, personality, religion, and culture. Offer explanations or answer questions at the most basic level appropriate for your child. Let your child guide you with additional questions. The well-being of your child should be the main focus. Your child may be consulted and encouraged to participate in decision making, but never forced.

Developmental Stages and Grief

The following serve as general guidelines for the grieving process of children. Many children develop differently and you will need to follow your child's lead. (Adapted with permission of the Bereavement Committee, University of Virginia Health System, and the Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia)

Infants and Toddlers can and do grieve. To them, the death of someone close can be an issue of separation and abandonment. They may experience sleep disturbances, regressive behavior, or explosive emotions. Use a reassuring, loving voice and gestures to show your child that someone is there to love and care for them.

Ages 3-5: Do not understand that death is final. They know their pet is gone but they believe it is a temporary situation. Preschoolers need reassurance that someone is there to take care of them and that they are secure. Give simple and direct answers to questions about the death. Read to the child from an age-appropriate book about loss. Encourage the expression of feelings through play, talking or drawing.

Ages 5-8: Understand that death is final, but they have difficulty imagining it on a personal level. They may visualize death as an angel, skeleton or monster. Expect questions about the physical aspects of death, and don't be surprised if a child in this age group expresses anger at the pet for leaving them. Answer questions directly. Let them know that their pet loved them and that it's okay to feel angry, or any other emotion.

Ages 9-12: Understand that death is final, personal and something that happens to everyone. Expect children in this age range to ask many questions and to have an almost morbid curiosity about death. Although they may appear to be coping well, preteens tend to keep many of their feelings hidden. Give them the time and opportunity to talk, share, express themselves and ask questions.

Ages 13-16: Because adolescents may not verbally express the intensity of their emotions, they are often mistakenly judged by their behavioral reactions to grief. Adolescents may attempt to mask their emotions from all but their closest friends. Although persons in this age group may refrain from emotions or expressions, clinical studies show that teenagers often have more intense grief than any other age group. Because they want to think of themselves as adults, it is important to encourage and respect their opinions and suggestions.

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How to Help Your Child

Honesty. Using deception, no matter how well intended, is never recommended. It will be difficult to regain the trust of your child if they ever discover that you distorted the truth or lied to them. Prepare children ahead of time for what to expect. Hold a family meeting and discuss the veterinarian's diagnosis, the pet's prognosis and the cost of treatments and care, including side effects and the pet's quality of life. If available and willing, you may want to consider enlisting the help of your veterinarian in having these discussions with your children.

Show emotions. Respect and encourage your child's need to express and share feelings of sadness. Let them see you upset and crying. By talking about sad feelings and crying, children learn that these emotions and behaviors are acceptable and appropriate. Don't feel as if you must have all the answers; sometimes just listening is enough. Expect that young children will ask and need answers to the same questions over and over again. Don't inadvertently cut off their feelings by noting how well your children are handling their grief or how brave or strong they are. Explain that it is the pet's death that makes you sad; otherwise they may worry that they are to blame.

Let children express grief in their own way. Children often react to death with outbursts of laughter, aggressiveness, hostility, boisterous activity, or in some other manner that may be unacceptable by adult standards. Be patient and supportive. Recognize that children grieve differently than adults and should not be punished because adults do not understand their reactions. Do not reward inappropriate behavior, however. Try to keep the child's routines as normal as possible. Behavior deemed inappropriate may be positively redirected by role-modeling acceptable alternatives for the child. (Although these reactions are quite normal, prolonged adverse reactions may indicate a need for the support of a professionally trained grief counselor.)

Respect the feelings of other family members. Recognize that not everyone in the family is equally attached to the pet and that not everyone shows their feelings or grieves in the same way.

Inform others of what's going on in your children's lives. Ask neighbors, teachers, relatives and friends for extra support and understanding of your children right now, and for help in keeping a watchful eye on them at this sad and difficult time.

Understanding Euthanasia

Include children in the euthanasia decision. Children need help to understand why the decision has to be made and a feeling that they've participated in making it. They also need an opportunity to say good-bye and make the most of whatever time they may have left with their pet.

If at all possible, do not plan to euthanize a companion animal while a child is away from home. If this cannot be prevented for medical reasons, be honest. Do not say that the companion animal ran away from home (unless this is the truth).

Help young children understand why euthanasia is necessary, in words they can understand.

Old age: "When animals get very old, their bodies wear out and stop working."

Terminal illness: "Because the disease couldn't be stopped, our pet is very sick. His body has worn out and stopped working."

An accident: "A terrible thing happened (hit by car etc.). Our pet's body was badly hurt and couldn't be fixed. It stopped working."

Explain euthanasia in a developmentally appropriate way. Explain that the pet will be helped to die peacefully and without pain.

"We will be taking Fluffy to the veterinarian to help her die. Dr. Smith will give Fluffy a shot filled with medicine that only works on animals. The shot will stop Fluffy's heart. When her heart stops, she won't be able to breathe on her own. She will not feel any pain."

"When an animal is suffering, we can choose to help them die. It's a very sad choice to make, but one that we want to think about because we love Snowball so much. We know that she is very sick and will die."

Avoid the common phrase for euthanasia, "put to sleep." Since we go to sleep nightly, associating this act with death creates anxiety and might lead to disruptions in sleeping routines or behaviors. (It can also cause fear over surgery and anesthesia.)

Allow the child to be present for the pet's euthanasia, if they choose. Let them know you will support their decision. The reality of a peaceful death is less traumatic to children than their fantasy of it. Young children may not understand the permanence of death unless they actually see that their pet is not "just asleep." If your child is not present for the euthanasia, you may ask them if they want to see their pet afterward. Demonstrate that it is OK to talk with their pet and touch its body. Offer older children an opportunity to spend time alone with their deceased pet so they can express their emotions privately, if needed.

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Explaining Death

Properly explaining death can help to demystify the concept as well as alleviate possible guilt. Explaining death to children can help to alleviate their fears or misconceptions. Children often wonder if the death could have been prevented or if the same thing might happen to them. Children also may wonder if they caused the death by something they said or thought. Make sure the child does not feel at fault—that they understand that their thoughts, feelings or words did not cause the death.

“It’s okay if you got mad at Socks. Your thoughts didn’t hurt him.”

Be simple and concrete. Use words such as “died” or “is dead.” Explain that every living thing can get sick or be hurt and that no living thing lives forever.

“Joey was very sick and his heart stopped beating.”

“Fluffy’s body stopped working.”

“You had nothing to do with Skippy’s death. He was very sick and his lungs and heart no longer worked.”

“At some point, all animals die.”

“Many animals have shorter lives than we do. They don’t live as long as people.”

Avoid euphemisms. Children are very literal and may become confused when adults use other terms for death such as “passed away,” “gone to sleep,” “moved on to a better place,” “left us,” or “gone on.” Such phrases might leave children feeling rejected or abandoned, or imply the companion animal may return or encourage them to go searching for the lost companion animal.

Avoid telling children that their pet was so good or so special that God wants it to be with Him in heaven. Children interpret information literally and may become angry with God or fear that they (or you) will be chosen next.

Don’t blame the veterinarian. Your children may develop fear of veterinarians and other health care givers.

What Happens Next?

Explain what will happen to the pet’s remains. If you plan to have your pet cremated, explain that your pet will be taken to a pet crematory, a place where the pet’s body will be turned into ashes. Then your family will take those ashes and (scatter them, bury them in the backyard, keep them in an urn, etc.). The use of words “fire” or “burn” can be scary to children. Be sure to explain that the pet cannot feel any pain. If you plan on burying your pet, explain that your pet will be sealed in a box or casket and put in the ground.

“Fluffy’s body will be put in a room that gets very, very hot. This will turn his body to ashes, which look a little bit like sand.”

“We wanted to cremate Fluffy so we could always have a way to remember him. We will keep his ashes in an urn, at our house. We can always take his ashes with us if we ever move.”

“We are going to bury Fluffy in the ground.”

Plan a memorial ritual. Decide how you’ll honor your pet’s life and keep its memory alive. Emphasis should be placed on the happy experiences that were shared with the deceased companion animal. Let children honor their companion animal in their own way. Encourage activities to help your children experience and express their love and grief (drawing or painting pictures, compiling an album, scrapbook or memory box, viewing videos or home movies, writing or sharing memories, planting a shrub or tree, reading books on pet loss).

“What is your favorite memory of Princess?”

“Snowball knows you loved her.”

“It’s okay to laugh and have fun as soon as you feel like it.”

“How about writing a letter or a story, or drawing a picture about the way you feel?”

Don’t immediately get a new pet in an effort to “replace” this one. During this process, it is important to not rush into a decision to adopt a new companion animal to take away the pain of grief. Getting a new pet too soon may imply to children that their grief is unimportant and unnecessary. It might imply that everything is replaceable, including the children themselves. The lesson children can learn through grief is that because relationships are special and unique, they are not replaceable. They also may react with anger or guilt, reject the new pet and/or feel disloyal to the one who died.

“It’s okay to not want a new pet.”

“It’s okay to want a new pet.”