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Helping Children Through Animal Loss

Posted By *April Norris* On March 10, 2014 @ 8:44 pm In | [Comments Disabled](#)



The death of an animal is often a child's first experience with the cycle of life. It is also a valuable opportunity to teach children that death is natural and universal. Parents often want to protect their children from the painful realities of the world – death included. While this is understandable, many parents are often surprised with how matter-of-fact children are about death and dying – especially when adults explain death in honest and simple terms.

In general, children of all ages need simple, honest information about what death means and what death looks like. When discussing euthanasia and death, it is best to use concrete words and simple explanations. Additionally, it is important to avoid the use of jargon (such as "putting Fluffy to sleep") that can be easily misunderstood. Young children may need to know that bodies stop working when they die (bodies can no longer hear, feel, see, or taste) and that death is permanent. Older children may need to know what condition led the body to stop working and why that condition could not be cured by a veterinarian.

Here are some things to keep in mind:

Offer to answer any question your child may have – even the silly, scary, or complicated ones. These questions may pop up at any point before or after the death of a loved animal. Be as open as possible about the details your child needs to know, as those details may help them to make sense out of what has happened. For assistance answering kids' nitty-gritty questions about death (such as "what is cremation?" or "what happens after a body is buried?"), please contact our counselors at (919) 513-3901.

When possible, provide children with an age-appropriate way to say goodbye to their animal. If your family is preparing for the death of an animal, either through euthanasia or an unassisted death, it is appropriate to ask your child how he/she wants to say goodbye to their animal. Writing a goodbye letter, drawing a picture to bury or cremate with the remains, or having a celebration before death (a "goodbye party" with treats and

storytelling) gives children a chance to achieve closure. It can also be helpful to provide children with an opportunity to be involved in memorialization rituals.

Listen without judgment and support the need to grieve. Children may have any number of responses to loss, including tearfulness, sleep disturbance, anxiousness, bedwetting, and impaired concentration at ^[1] school. These responses are normal and often temporary. Invite your child to talk about their feelings and reassure them that these feelings are okay. Children with less developed verbal skills often benefit from having non-verbal opportunities to process grief. Crafting scrap books or memory boxes, or creating a collage of mementos, can give form to important feelings.



Avoid re-storying a death. It can be tempting to create an alternative story to why an animal is no longer present (e.g. "he went to live on a farm.") Surprisingly, though, children often find out about an animal's death – sometimes many years after the death has occurred. Children are better equipped to understand and cope with loss over the course of their lifetime if death is explained in a clear, sensitive, and timely manner.

Find comfort in routines and play. All creatures, whether human or animal, find comfort in the daily routines that give our days form and focus. Maintaining the normal daily schedule for meals, bedtime, and play time is an important part of coping with a life-changing loss. Laughter – or taking a break from the sadness – also serves as a healing salve for hurting hearts.

Make space for remembering. Encourage children to share favorite stories about their animal and to remember the happiest times with that animal. Those memories are part of the natural healing process and can provide great comfort months, and even years, after an animal's death.

Recommended Family Reading:

Buscaglia, L. (1982). *The fall of Freddie the leaf: A story for all ages.* Slack Book Division.

Cardeccia, K. (2004). *Healing your heart when your animal friend is gone: A children's pet bereavement workbook.* Bree's Gift Publishing.

Carney, K. (1999). *Our special garden: Understanding cremation.* Dragonfly Publishing.

Heegaard, M. (2001). *Saying goodbye to your pet: Children can learn to cope with pet loss.* Fairview.

Rogers, F. (1988). *When a pet dies.* Putnam Publishing Group.

Rylant, C. (1996). *Cat heaven.* Blue Sky Press.

Rylant, C. (1995). Dog heaven. Blue Sky Press.

Viorst, J. (1971). The tenth good thing about Barney. Atheneum.

Yue, S. (2012). Snort's special gift: A family story. Beaver's Pond Press.

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[1] Image: http://www.ncstatevets.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/dog-and-cat-illustration_small.jpg

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