



L O V E N E V E R L E A V E S SM

Eight Ways to Help Kids Through the Grieving Process

The following recommendations are intended to help parents like you confront your child's grief over the loss of a dear pet, and aid in your child's understanding and acceptance of death.

1. **It's important for your child to know that the pet has died, and won't be returning.** Your child needs to know that the pet's body has stopped functioning. This opens the door to making certain the child knows what dying means, in the physical sense. Regardless of your family's religious or spiritual beliefs, there should be no ambiguity about the physical finality of death.
2. **Do not avoid the use of the words "death" or "dying" in your explanations.** Being open and honest with your child means being very direct, but using a gentle approach at all times. Speed in letting your child know right away is also important. Delaying the discussion of the inevitable doesn't create any good, and often causes more harm than addressing the situation in a timely manner.

These concerns are especially of note when your pet is in the process of dying of a terminal illness, and needs to be euthanized. Help your child understand that your pet is in dire discomfort and pain, and all that can be done and will be done by the family and the veterinarian will be to relieve your pet from that pain.

3. **It's OK to show your own sadness.** This is a signal to your child that your pet was special to you as well, and that the child is not grieving all alone. As your child's primary role model, you may think you need to be strong for your child. But in fact, hiding your grief sends a different message to your child – that his/her own grief is bad or shameful, which only worsens the situation.

Sit with your child, and have a quiet talk about how it's good to show your grief. It's all right to cry to let out the hurt feelings. It's the normal thing to do when a beloved pet dies. Your child should be encouraged to talk about your pet, and possibly say a prayer for their lost furry or feathered friend.

4. **Don't forget to let your child's teachers know about the death of your pet.** They need this information in the event that your child is sad or behaves differently at school. Teachers should also respectfully encourage your child to inform school friends of the death of the pet. Your child's friends may notice a change in your child's behavior and wonder about it. So they have a legitimate need to know.
5. **Don't exhibit "blaming behaviors."** While you want to ease the grief of your child, this is a time for promoting understanding across the board, in reasonable and caring ways. As such, blaming the veterinarian for the loss of your pet isn't appropriate, and neither is blaming yourself or anyone else in the household for not acting one way or another. This serves to alleviate any future distrust for veterinarians or others. In fact, as is often the case, the veterinarian may also be grieving for the pet he or she has taken care of for years, and it's well that your child should know that.
6. **Children are going to be curious about the process of euthanasia.** They'll have questions, and the veterinarian can often help with answers. Some may even ask to be present at the euthanasia. This is strictly a parental decision, one that depends on the age and maturity of your child. But don't be surprised if your veterinarian objects - you will find that some veterinarians strongly oppose children being present.



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7. **Never give your child the impression that their beloved pet is replaceable.** As an adult, it may be easier for you to understand (though not always) that getting a new pet doesn't mean you're just replacing the one who's passed on. But many professionals who deal with pet death believe it's a mistake for parents to bring home another pet right away, without allowing your child to work his or her way through the grieving process. When the time is right for a new pet, it's often your child who triggers that decision, by expressing interest in having a new pet and what kind of pet that should be.
8. **Normally, most children get over their grief quicker than adults.** But should your child continue to grieve deeply, experience nightmares, and/or appear unable to cope with the loss of your pet, it's possible that professional counseling may be necessary. Once you perceive your child's inability to cope with your pet's death, all care should be taken to secure counseling for your child without delay.