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## Explaining Pet Loss to Children at Different Ages

It's natural to want to protect your child from painful experiences. Most adults, however, are surprised to find how well most children adjust to the death of a pet, if they are prepared with honest, simple explanations.

From a young age, children begin to understand the concept of death, even though they may be unaware of it at a conscious level. "Any child old enough to love is old enough to mourn," says Alan Wolfelt, PhD., world-renowned grief expert.

When a pet is dying, it may be more difficult for your child to resolve the grief experienced if he or she isn't told the truth with a clear, direct, and gentle approach. For example, you should avoid using terms like "put to sleep" when discussing euthanasia of a family pet. Your child could misinterpret this common phrase, indicating the adult's denial of death, and develop a terror of bedtime.

And suggesting to your child that "God has taken" your pet might create conflict in your child, who could become angry at the higher power for cruelty toward your pet and himself or herself.

Children are capable of understanding, each in their own way, that life must end for all living things. Support their grief by acknowledging their pain. The death of your pet can be an opportunity for your child to learn that adult caretakers can be relied upon to extend comfort and reassurance. It's an important opportunity to encourage your child to express his or her feelings.

And while acknowledging that each child will cope in his or her own unique way, here are some general guidelines for what to expect from children experiencing pet death at different ages:

**Two- and Three-Year- Olds:** Children who are two or three years old typically have no understanding of death. They often consider it a form of sleep, but they should be told in a straightforward and kind way that their pet has died, and will not return.

Common reactions to this include temporary loss of speech and generalized distress. They may even blame themselves for the pet's death, and should be reassured that the pet's failure to return is unrelated to anything the child may have said or done.

Typically, a child in this age range will readily accept another pet in place of the dead one. But keep in mind that with children with this age, it's also typical for time to pass and for the child to wake up one morning and inquire when the pet will be returning.

**Four-, Five-, and Six-Year-Olds:** Children in this age range have some understanding of death, but in a way that relates to a continued existence. The pet may be considered to be living underground, while continuing to eat, breathe, and play. Alternatively, as with younger children, the pet may be considered asleep.

A return to life may be expected if the child views death as temporary. These children often feel that any anger they had for the pet may be responsible for its death. This view must be refuted, especially because children may also translate this belief to the death of family members in the past, or fear the effect of their anger on others in the future.



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Some children at this age also see death as contagious, and begin to fear that their own death (or that of others) is imminent. They should be reassured that their death is not likely.

Manifestations of grief often take the form of disturbances in bladder and bowel control, eating, and sleeping. This is best managed by parent-child discussions that allow the child to express feelings and concerns. Several brief discussions are generally more productive than one or two prolonged sessions.

**Seven-, Eight-, and Nine-Year-Olds:** The irreversibility of death becomes real to these children. They usually do not personalize death, or think it can happen to them any time soon in the wake of the pet's death.

However, some children may develop concerns about death of their parents. They may become very curious about death and its implications. Parents should be ready to respond frankly and honestly to questions that may arise. Avoiding or shutting down these questions only leads to additional difficulty in coping with death and grief as a natural part of life.

Several manifestations of grief may occur in these children, including the development of school problems, learning problems, antisocial behavior, concerns of being a hypochondriac, or aggression. Additionally, withdrawal, over-attentiveness, or clinging behavior may be seen. Based on grief reactions to loss by parents or siblings, it is likely that these symptoms may not occur immediately, but several weeks or months later.

This age group will also become very curious about the physical and practical details of death "What happens with a deceased body?" "How hot does the cremation process get?" "Where did Fluffy go?" This interest is healthy – it's their way of processing the death and what it means in their world.

Answer the questions openly and honestly. And if you don't know the answer to these questions, turn to an expert to help you and your child.

**Adolescents:** Although this age group reacts similarly to adults, many adolescents may exhibit various forms of denial. This usually takes the form of a lack of emotional display. Consequently, these young people may be experiencing sincere grief without any outward manifestations.

Additionally, certain traditional aspects adolescence – awkwardness in self-expression, peer pressure, tension between adolescent and parents over behavior and boundaries – may serve to mask or prevent the normal healthy expression of grief. The adolescent's behavior should be monitored carefully over the weeks and months following the death of a pet, to ensure that he or she gets help if needed from an appropriate source.