

Children and Grief

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Guiding children through the death of an animal can be both tricky and tremendously rewarding. While many parents struggle with decisions around how (and how much) to talk about death with their kids, not talking about the death of a loved one can actually make the grieving process more difficult for children and adults alike. This is especially true when the death of an animal is a child's first experience with loss. One of the most important things to remember is that children of all ages need simple, honest information about when a death has occurred and what death looks like. When discussing the death of an animal, use concrete words to describe what happens to the body during the process and avoid the use of jargon or "soft" terms. For instance, younger children may need to know that bodies stop working when they die (bodies can no longer hear, feel, see, or taste). Older children may need to know what condition led the body to stop working and why that condition could not be fixed by the veterinarian. Similarly, it is important to discuss euthanasia simply. Instead of using words like, "having Rocket put down" or "putting Princess to sleep" (which can leave kids confused about what it means to sleep or rest), it is preferable to explain euthanasia as something veterinarians do for animals who need help to die peacefully and without pain (or, for younger children, to help dying animals leave their bodies).

Additionally, there are a number of general guidelines for supporting children through the grieving process:

- Offer to answer any question your child may have- even the silly, difficult, 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. There are many books geared toward answering kids' nitty-gritty questions about death (such as "what is cremation? or "what happens after a body is buried?").
- Give them choices about how they want to be involved. If your family is preparing for the death of an animal, either through euthanasia or an assisted death, explain what that death may look like and ask your child how he/she wants the goodbye to look and feel. Likewise, children can be given choices about whether they want to visit with remains after death and how they want to be involved in burial or memorialization rituals.
- Listen without judgment. There is no right way to grieve, and children may have any number of responses to loss (including tearfulness, nervousness, sleep disturbance, and impaired concentration at school). Invite your child to talk about the death of their animal, and make sure they know that their feelings are normal. Their animal was important to them, and it is okay to feel any number of ways when that animal is gone.
- Support their grief, whatever the form. Some children, especially those with less developed verbal skills, benefit from having non-verbal opportunities to process grief. Creating a scrapbook, drawing pictures, taking clippings of fur, or making imprints of paws can give children an outlet for both their creativity and their feelings.
- 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.
- Balance the grief with laughter and joy. It is healthy to give ourselves a break from the deep sadness that comes from the death of a loved animal. In fact, taking a break from grief to do something fun may actually help facilitate the grief process. Laughter is a wonderful healing salve, so make sure your child knows that being able to laugh and have fun does not mean they love their animal any less.
- Embrace routine. The death of a loved one is often very disruptive to a child's sense of safety and security. At such a difficult time, it can be comforting to know what to expect from each day. If your family has an established routine around mealtimes, bedtimes, chores, religious worship, and/or recreation, it will be important to maintain those routines now. It may even be helpful to integrate a ritual of remembrance into the daily routine. For instance, a family whose evening is spent around exercising or grooming an animal may choose to light a candle every evening in that animal's memory.