



The Grieving Child
Helen Fitzgerald

column

When a Child's Pet Dies

People who have never had pets don't know what they're missing. A dog, cat, or other pet can add greatly to the richness of life and provide wonderful companionship for a master or mistress of any age. This is particularly true for children. A pet provides a child with unconditional love and a sense of being needed and appreciated. While grown-ups and older siblings have their own priorities, a child's pet is usually a reliable playmate, bedmate, and companion. So when a pet dies, this loss can be very hard on a child.

Sad as it may be, the death of a pet can be an important learning experience for a child, preparing her or him for even more painful losses that are bound to come some day. Much as we like to dismiss the thought, all life is terminal, including our own. Rather than shield our children from this reality, it is far better that they learn about it as they are growing up.

As a parent, how can you help your child not only mourn the loss of her pet but learn from the experience? To begin with, I would suggest that you have a talk with her about what she would like to do. Children like ceremonies, and she might want to have a little funeral and burial service. Or she might prefer to have the veterinarian take care of the body. In any case, her answers will give you a clue to her feelings. If she cries, let her cry; this is a natural part of the process of grief.

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The meaning of death is something that is hard for children to grasp. Young children, especially, will seem to understand when you tell them that someone has died, only to ask a little later when that person will be coming home. The death of a pet provides an opportunity to explain this difficult concept more fully.

When you have that talk with your child, I suggest you begin by discussing what life meant to the pet. Let's say the family dog, Tiger, has died. When Tiger was alive, he could bark, he could eat--oh, how he could eat. He could retrieve a ball, he could "go to the bathroom." After considering together all the things Tiger enjoyed in life, you could add: "Tiger can't do those things anymore. He will never be able to do them again." I find that children are deeply moved by this explanation of the meaning of death.

There are a number of excellent books that can help you discuss this with your child. Two of my favorites are "The Tenth Good Thing About Barney," by Judith Viorst (also available in video form), and "I'll Always Love You," by Hans Wilhelm. Both stories are about the death of beloved pets and are suitable for young children.

It will help your child express his grief if he has some outlet for his feelings. For example, if your son decides he wants a little ceremony for his cat, Spooky, you could suggest that he write a note to be buried with the cat. He could write a poem. He might decide to bury one of Spooky's toys along with his departed friend. He might want to paint Spooky's name on a little headstone. In doing these things, he will begin to discharge his grief over the loss of his pet.

Sometimes, pet deaths are sudden, as when they are accident victims, but more commonly pets develop ailments and start to decline gradually. The time may come when a choice has to

be made--to take the pet to an animal hospital to be euthanized or to allow it to die naturally at home. Surely, a key question is whether the pet is in pain. If you decide that the animal hospital choice is necessary, you should discuss this with your child before you act. But be careful about using the term "put to sleep," as your child might get the wrong idea. He might think that his pet will wake up later, or, worse yet, he might be afraid to go to sleep for fear of a similar fate. In discussing this option, a consoling thought would be that the vet can help the pet to "die gently."

Once a pet has died, do you obtain a replacement pet? It is not a good idea for children to think that anything, or anyone, can be replaced. When I was a girl, my beloved dog, Jocky, was killed when she wandered out onto the highway next to our farm. I thought I could replace her by keeping one of her pups, very similar in appearance, and giving the puppy the same name. It didn't work. The replacement Jocky could never live up to the charms of the original. I don't recommend that fate for your child's next pet either.

It's not even a good idea to obtain a new pet too quickly. Your child needs to grieve awhile over the loss of her beloved pet. In time, you might obtain another pet for her, but preferably a different breed or different species that will be loved not for its similarity to the one who died but in its own right.

Childhood is a time that will always be treasured in your child's memory. But it is also a time that should prepare him for whatever life has to offer, including, sadly, the loss of people and things he loves. The death of a much-loved pet can provide you with an opportunity to tell him about life's limitations, to share in his sadness, and to bond with him in a way that will serve you both for years to come.

Helen Fitzgerald is a nationally respected educator, author, and lecturer on bereavement. Her books include ['The Grieving Child: A Parents' Guide'](#), and ['The Mourning Handbook.'](#)