

Helping Children **AFTER PET LOSS**

Jason Troyer, PhD



The death of a pet always leaves a hole in our hearts. Perhaps one of the most heartbreaking parts of pet loss is helping children with their grief. This booklet provides you with practical strategies for helping children understand and grieve the loss of an animal companion. I hope it helps you and your family as you mourn the death of your pet.

Sincerely,
Jason Troyer PhD



Learning the “Rules” of Grief is Important

A child’s first experience with death is often through the loss of a pet. I firmly believe that children learn ‘rules’ about grief through these experiences. These lessons are often repeated with later deaths (whether those losses involve animals or people). For example, if a family never talks about a pet after its death, then the child may learn the ‘rule’: we never talk about those who have died. Later, the child may incorrectly assume that we shouldn’t talk about grandma after she dies. Therefore, helping children grieve the death of their pet in a healthy way can have important implications for understanding later losses.

What NOT to Do

After the death of a pet, do NOT:

- ❖ Try to minimize your child's grief by saying things like, "Don't be sad" or "It's not that bad"
- ❖ Rush your child's grief process by expecting them to "get over" the loss in a few days or weeks
- ❖ Ignore what has happened by getting rid of all reminders of your pet and not talking about them
- ❖ Confuse your child by using vague language about "going to sleep"
- ❖ Fabricate a story about how your pet went to live somewhere else or ran away
- ❖ Force your child to grieve by making them talk or share

Helping Children Express Their Grief

All children can benefit from the opportunity to express their grief and memories. Children will take their cues from adults; if adults show that it is OK to share their thoughts, feelings, and memories, then they will be more likely to share too. The easiest method is simply to talk about your pet. You might discuss events and topics such as these:

- ❖ The first time you met your pet
- ❖ The adjustments you had to make as the pet joined the family
- ❖ Your pet's favorite foods, toys, and activities
- ❖ A time when your pet did something funny
- ❖ Your favorite memories of your pet

Other activities that may be helpful include:

- ❖ Looking at pictures and videos of your pet
- ❖ Drawing, coloring, and painting pictures that include or relate to your pet
- ❖ Writing about your memories of your pet (for example, poems, songs, letters, etc.)

While these activities can be helpful, be sure your child is choosing to participate. Don't force them if they do not want to participate.

Suggestions for Specific Age-Groups

Preschoolers (Ages 2-5)

Some parents believe that preschool children are incapable of grief – this is a faulty assumption. If a child is old enough to understand that a pet is part of the family, they are old enough to feel grief and loss. It is important that they are told what has happened. Preschool children often do not understand the permanence of death; they often equate death with sleep or pretending to be dead. This is normal for children of this age. You will probably have to remind them repeatedly that your deceased pet is not just sleeping and it cannot come back tomorrow. Further confusing the matter is that we often use 'put to sleep' in place of 'euthanize.' Be as clear as possible when explaining the cause of the death. Specifically, explain the differences between death and sleep in as simple terms as possible.



Children (Ages 6-12)

Younger children in this age group may also need to be reminded of the permanence of death, but most children will have an accurate understanding of the physical aspects of death. Children of this age may have questions about the process of death and related spiritual and religious questions. Furthermore, they will be quick to relate this loss to other deaths (e.g., deceased grandparents or other family members). It is best to keep it simple and honest, especially for children under 10. Most importantly, be responsive to children's questions and never make them feel ashamed for asking them.

Adolescents (Ages 13-Adult)

Adolescents will often grieve more like adults, and they typically understand the permanence and irreversibility of loss. However, adolescents may express their grief in rebellious or defiant ways. The death of a beloved pet may cause an adolescent to reflect on and ask questions about life, death, what happens after death, and the meaning of life. It is common for families to get pets when their children are relatively young -- therefore adolescents may not remember a time before their pet was a part of the family. Recognize that their bond with their pet may have developed over 10, 15 years, or more.

Children and Loss: Patience and Perspective

Most adults have had previous experiences with grief and know that it stings terribly at first but usually gets better over time. However, for most children the death of their pet may be their first significant loss, and they may believe that their current level of pain and sadness will continue indefinitely. Remember that your child is learning new and complex concepts: that bodies wear out and that living creatures die and don't come back to life. Just as a preschooler has to learn that she can't simply wish that Christmas will be tomorrow and make it

happen, children aren't born with an understanding of death. Be patient with your child as he or she deals with the death of their pet and begins to comprehend what death means.

Including Children in Funerals and Rituals

It may be especially helpful for children to participate in a family funeral or other ritual. This may include burying your pet, spreading the ashes, or simply telling stories about your pet. Funerals or other rituals can be helpful because they provide structure during an uncertain time and an opportunity to express loss and share feelings. Children often appreciate being given an explicit opportunity to talk about their feelings, what they miss about their pet, and what they will always remember. While no child should be forced to participate in a funeral or ritual, they should be given a chance to make an age-appropriate contribution. Finally, funerals and other rituals can help reinforce that their pet was an important part of the family and that it is normal to feel grief and loss.



General Concepts & Advice

- ❖ Encourage your child to talk about your pet, the process of the pet's death, and related topics.
- ❖ Children will look to your example. Be honest about your reactions and demonstrate to them that it is normal to be sad and talk about your pet. They will learn that it's normal to miss their pet and feel loss.
- ❖ Children may respond to grief by acting out, being frustrated and angry, feeling sad, wanting time alone, and other responses. Try to be especially patient with them.
- ❖ Avoid rushing the transition – it is ok to leave out bowls, leashes, pet toys, etc. for a few days or weeks while the entire family adjusts to the loss. There are no prizes for 'getting over' one's grief as quickly as possible.
- ❖ Be as clear as possible about the cause of death. Avoid using the term "sleep" in place of death.
- ❖ If your pet was euthanized, reinforce that death was not painful and the pet no longer experiences any discomfort.
- ❖ Don't be worried if your child doesn't express grief or sadness right away. Children may not fully grasp the implications of death and may not know how to show their reaction.
- ❖ Encourage your children to share memories associated with their pet.

Need More Help?

Visit www.GriefPlan.com for helpful videos and articles to help you heal, remember, and rebuild after loss. These resources cover topics such as:

- ❖ Helping children as they grieve
- ❖ Healing after the loss of a spouse, parent, child, and other loved ones
- ❖ Dealing with traumatic losses due to suicide, overdose, and accidents
- ❖ Recognizing signs that you may need professional help
- ❖ A step-by-step video program to help you through your grief

About the Author

Dr. Jason Troyer earned his master's degree in counseling and his doctorate in counseling psychology. He is a published author, grief researcher, and former college professor and therapist.

© 2022 Jason Troyer PhD