



Supporting a child after the death of a pet

What is grief?

Grief is a catch-all term for the many and varied emotions we feel when we are bereaved or have lost something. We may feel grief connected to a whole range of situations: moving house, leaving school/job, loss of a treasured item or even when bad weather spoils our best laid plans.

How might children grieve?

The experience of grief for a child can be described as 'puddle jumping'. Bereaved adults may feel like they are wading through grief like a river, whereas bereaved children appear to exist more in the moment. A child can jump in and out of that puddle of grief: they may appear completely grief stricken and overwhelmed and then return to their 'normal self' within a couple of minutes. This is completely expected and is an unconscious mechanism used to stop the child becoming completely overwhelmed by the feeling of grief.

Anxiety, sleep difficulties, sadness and longing, anger and acting out behaviour, guilt, self-reproach and shame, school problems, and physical complaints are very common grief reactions in children.

Explaining death to a child

If the pet has been unwell or death is expected, it can help to introduce the concept of death prior to the animal dying. If the death of a loved pet is the child's first experience of bereavement, they will be experiencing feelings that are brand new - which can be really scary. Their grief response may appear to be out of proportion or overwhelming; however, the sooner a child has information and explanations for difficult or changing situations, the sooner they may be able to start to make sense of it. It will help your child if they have a clear explanation, as this will help them to understand what's happened.

Before you tell a child that their pet has died, you could start by talking more broadly about death. Ask what they already know about what happens when someone or something dies, as this will offer you a starting point. Because death is quite an abstract concept for a child, you could begin by explaining that when leaves fall from trees it means they are no longer living. They may be familiar with the changing of the seasons and may be able to make sense of death in this way.



Telling a child that a loved pet has died

When you are speaking to your child, keep the information simple and truthful by using words they can understand. Say 'dead' or 'died' - these words will stop children becoming confused. Try not to use euphemisms like 'gone to the farm', 'passed away', 'gone to sleep' or 'lost.'

- o If the pet had an illness before they died, you could begin by saying something like, "I have something sad to tell you. As you know, [Name of pet] has been very poorly. The vet tried very hard to make them better, but sadly s/he died."
- o If the pet has died suddenly, prepare the child for the sad news you are about to tell them. Sit close to the child and explain you have something sad to tell them about their pet.

Explain that their pet's body has stopped working and they have died: their heart is not beating and they are not breathing. They are not feeling pain because they have died. Let the child know they can ask questions about what has happened.

Reassure your child that it is OK to cry and express emotions. Remember that it is OK for adults to show emotion in front of their children: this can remove a barrier and encourage children to be honest about their own feelings.

Keep in mind the 'puddle jumping' analogy: the child may want to get straight up and play, or they may become overwhelmed by their grief. You may notice your child puddle jumping for some time after the death, particularly if this is their first experience of being bereaved.

Remembering their pet

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- **Create a memory box** – Decorated in memory of their pet, things inside should remind the child of happy times. Items may include: photographs, the pet's lead, their food bowl, and drawings. The box can be opened and looked at whenever the child needs to feel connected to their pet, or be reminded of happy times.
 - **Hold a memorial service** – The child may wish to hold their own service, reading a poem and talking about happy memories. This may be a one-off or something done on a special occasion.
 - **Plant a tree or plant** – It may be helpful to have something in the child's garden or local park where a child can go and 'be with' or talk to their beloved pet. The planting could be part of a memorial service.
 - **Make a donation to a rescue centre or animal charity** - The child may wish to make a donation in the name of their pet to a local animal charity, as a lasting memory. If the pet died of an illness, it may bring the child comfort to know they are donating towards finding a cure.
 - **Make an object using a blanket or bed** – The child may wish to help in creating a cushion, blanket or teddy bear using one or a number of pieces of fabric from items belonging to their pet. This could help the child to feel close to their pet, or comforted at times of sadness or distress.

