



OVC Pet Trust

Helping Children with the Loss of a Pet

A Support Guide for Pet Owners



Piglet: “How do you spell ‘love’?”
Pooh: “You don’t spell it...you feel it.”
— A. A. Milne’s *Winnie the Pooh*



Support for Pet Owners: Helping Children with the Loss of a Pet

An Introduction

A cherished companion animal is a family member, and experiencing their death is real and significant. For many pet owners, their beloved animal is never “just a dog” or “just a cat”. Each family member has a unique relationship with the family pet and when that pet dies, each member of the family is affected. Adults grieve, and so do children. People say if you are old enough to love, you are old enough to grieve. All children are different and their method of healing after losing a pet is a complex and ongoing process, not an event.

Children grieve in waves and over time. As adults, we often sit down and have long, hard conversations and know the social niceties of these discussions. Children are often in and out of their grief. One minute they are playing with a toy, and the next they are asking if their dog will eat in heaven – a difficult question for adults to attempt to answer. Children do not wait for certain moments to bring up death or the deceased; rather, they are in the moment and say whatever is on their mind.

This Pet Loss Support Guide, developed at the University of Guelph’s Ontario Veterinary College (OVC), provides suggestions and ideas for adults to help children with the journey of healing following the death of a pet. The information in this resource is meant to serve as a guide and is not meant to replace professional help. Please refer to the Resources section for more information.



“No time on earth is long enough to share with the animals we love, or prepare our hearts to say goodbye.”
— Author Unknown



Saying Goodbye

When possible, should children be informed in advance of losing a pet? How much information should I share with children about pet loss and death?

Learning to accept illness, injury or death is a natural experience in life. It can be useful for some children to have the opportunity to participate in family discussions about loss and grief. Being involved in the decision-making process of a family pet that is seriously ill or injured may provide valuable lessons for children about responsibility, compassion, commitment and coping.

When a companion animal is ill, adults may try to hide worry and anxiety from their children. However, if children do not receive the information they need from you, they may seek other, less reliable sources. When a child inquires and is denied adequate information, they may delve into their own imagination or memory to create an answer, which may intensify misinformation, anxiety, fear and adverse emotional reactions. Involving and informing children throughout the process of saying goodbye to a pet may help alleviate these feelings.

Whenever possible, avoid using the word “sick” and use the actual diagnosis for the pet. Children are literal and may believe the next time they or someone else in their life has a cold and are sick, that they will die. By labeling the disease you are giving children the language and tools to understand what is happening. It can be sad and worrisome to hear a four-year-old child say the word “cancer”, but to them it is just a word. It doesn’t have the same connotation that it does to adults.

“My dog is dying because he has a disease called cancer. The cancer is in his body and we can’t fix it. It wasn’t anyone’s fault that he got cancer.”

“The cancer is in my dog’s body and it will stop his body from working properly.”

Each child is a unique individual and the discussions you engage in will be based on a variety of factors including the child’s age, development, personality, religion and culture. Offer explanations or answer questions at the most basic level appropriate for the child. Let children guide you with additional questions. The well-being of the child should always be the main focus. Being honest and showing emotions can help everyone. Don’t feel that you need to hide your sadness from your children. If you do this, and they feel sad, they may think that their feelings aren’t warranted or there’s something wrong with them for feeling sad.

Prepare children ahead of time for what to expect when it is time to say goodbye to their pet. Hold a family meeting and discuss the veterinarian’s diagnosis, the pet’s prognosis and the impact of

treatments and care, including side effects and the pet's quality of life. If available and willing, you may want to consider enlisting the help of your veterinarian in having these discussions with children. Understanding what the veterinary hospital room may look like and seeing photos of equipment, if appropriate, can also help prepare children for what might happen. Often children make things up that are worse and scarier than they are in real life. By seeing photos, you are giving them a visual that is truthful and that they can use to understand the process of saying goodbye.

“Sometimes you will never know the value of a moment until it becomes a memory.”
— Dr. Seuss



“No matter how or when we lose our furry friends, their love lasts a lifetime.” — Author Unknown



Understanding and Explaining Death

How can I explain what is happening or what has happened to our pet?

If considering euthanizing your pet and if it is appropriate, parents may want to consider including children in the conversation; children may need help to understand why the decision has to be made and have a feeling they have participated in making it. They also need an opportunity to say goodbye in their own way and make the most of whatever time they may have left with their pet if possible. Engaging children in conversations about death can help them feel involved and feel reassured their feelings about losing their pet matter.

Young children may need help understanding why euthanasia is necessary in words they can understand:

- Old age: *"When animals get very old, their bodies wear out and stop working. The body parts that are old and worn out cannot be replaced."*
- Terminal illness: *"Because the disease couldn't be stopped, our pet is very sick*. His/her body has worn out and stopped working."*

*Be mindful of using the word sick. If possible, substitute this word by talking about the pet's clinical signs of its illness, and because of this, the body isn't working properly anymore. Be specific with the words you use. Children can handle precise language.

- An accident: *"A terrible thing happened (e.g. hit by a car). Our pet's body was badly hurt and couldn't be fixed."*

It is important to explain death (euthanasia) in a developmentally-appropriate manner. Let children know their pet will be helped to die peacefully and without pain.

- *"We will be taking Charlie to the veterinarian to help him die. Dr. Smith will give Charlie a needle filled with medicine that will stop his breathing. He will not feel any pain. When an animal is suffering, we can choose to help them die peacefully, to prevent further suffering or pain. It's a very sad choice to make, but one that we want to think about because we love Charlie so much. We know that he is very ill and won't get better."*

- Avoid the common phrase for euthanasia, “put to sleep”. Since we go to sleep nightly, associating this act with death may create anxiety and might lead to disruptions in sleeping routines or behaviours. It can also cause fear over surgery and anesthesia.
- Allow the child to be present for their pet’s euthanasia, if they choose. Let them know you will support their decision and that it’s perfectly ok for them not to be present. The reality of a peaceful death may be less traumatic to children than their fantasy of it. Young children may not understand the permanence of death unless they actually see that their pet is not “just asleep”. You may encourage the child to bring a comfort item with them such as a teddy bear or a special blanket.
- If the child is present for the euthanasia, your veterinarian can help prepare you for what to expect during the procedure. If the child chooses not to be present, it is also important to support their choice.
- If the child is not present for the euthanasia, you may ask them if they want to see their pet afterward. Demonstrate that it is okay to talk with their pet and touch its body. Offer older children an opportunity to spend time alone with their deceased pet so they can express their emotions privately if needed. Reinforce that it is acceptable for them to change their mind if they want to be a part of the euthanasia and/or see their pet when it’s gone.



“I can no longer see you with my eyes, touch you with my hands, but I will feel you in my heart forever.”
— Author unknown



Helping Children Grieve

How should I talk to children about death? How do children cope with pet loss?

Caring for children who are grieving and talking about death can be intimidating and overwhelming. Children who are grieving don't need different support, they just need more of it. They need more love, more understanding, more time and more patience from their caregivers.

Let children express grief in their own way.

Children sometimes react to death with outbursts of laughter, aggressiveness, hostility, boisterous activity or in some other manner that may be unacceptable by adult standards. Be patient and supportive. Recognize that children may grieve differently than adults, requiring parental understanding and guidance. Try to keep the child's routines as normal as possible. Behaviour deemed inappropriate may be positively redirected by role-modelling acceptable alternatives for the child. Children may act out in anger. For example, if a child punches someone, it is okay to redirect this behaviour. You just need to be careful to emphasize to the child that they

are not in trouble for being angry, but rather for punching. You can tell your child that you are angry too. Although these reactions are quite normal, prolonged adverse reactions may indicate a need for the support of a professionally trained grief counsellor. Everyone grieves differently: siblings, friends or other family members of the child — even other pets in the home — may grieve in their own way. There is no “right” way to miss a pet.

Be simple and concrete.

Many children interpret situations very literally. Use clear words such as “died” or “is dead”. Explain that every living thing can get sick or be hurt and that no living thing lives forever. Children are concrete thinkers and may become confused when adults use other vague terms for death such as passed away, gone to sleep, moved on to a better place, left us or gone on. Such phrases might cause some children to feel rejected or abandoned by the pet, imply the pet may return or encourage children to go searching for the lost pet.

Don’t blame the veterinarian.

Children may become distrustful of veterinarians and other health professionals if they overhear any conversations expressing blame for the death of the pet on the veterinary care team.

Inform other adults in the child’s life.

Letting other people in the child’s life know about the loss of their pet may be helpful. Informing others such as school teachers, babysitters, daycare workers and parents of the child’s friends is beneficial because it is not always predictable when or where the child’s grief will be expressed.

Show emotions.

Respect and encourage the expression and the sharing of feelings. Don't be afraid to let children see your expressions of grief too. It is easy to feel uncomfortable and intimidated speaking to children about death, but don't feel as if you must have all the answers; sometimes just listening is enough. Let children see you upset and crying. By talking about feelings, children learn these emotions and behaviours are acceptable and appropriate. Expect that young children will ask and need answers to the same questions over and over again. Encourage children to talk about how they are feeling, as opposed to assuming that a lack of expression of grief is an indication that they are coping well with the loss of the family pet.

Don't immediately get a new pet in an effort to "replace" the one you lost.

During this process, it is important not to rush into making any decisions about welcoming a new pet as a means of alleviating the pain of grief. Getting a new pet too soon may imply to children that their grief is unimportant and unnecessary. It might also imply that everything is replaceable, including the children themselves. The lesson children can learn through grief is that because relationships are special and unique, they are not replaceable. They may also react with anger or guilt, reject the new pet, or feel disloyal to the one who died. Involve the child in making the decision as to when is the best time to get a new pet, and what type of pet they may want to get.

"When tomorrow starts without me, don't think we're far apart. For every time you think of me, I'm right here inside your heart."

— Author Unknown

What happens next?

Explain what will happen to the pet's remains. If you plan to have your pet cremated, explain that your pet will be taken to a pet crematory, a place where the pet's body will be turned into ashes. The use of words such as "fire" or "burn" can be scary to children. You could describe cremation as a process that occurs at extremely high heat – about three times as hot as your oven at home. Be sure to explain that the pet cannot feel any pain because they are dead. If you plan on burying your pet, explain that your pet's body will be sealed in a box or casket and placed in the ground and again emphasize that the pet is dead, so they will no longer be scared to be underground, or hungry or alone, because they have died. Explain that when a dead body is buried in the ground, it breaks down after months and years and just a skeleton is left; cremation makes this happen much, much faster.

Explain death in a developmentally-appropriate manner.

Properly explaining death can help clarify the concept and alleviate possible feelings of guilt and uncertainty. Explaining death to children can help them cope with their fears and misconceptions. Children often wonder if the death could have been prevented or if the same thing might happen to them. Children may also wonder if they caused the death by something they said or thought. Make sure the child does not feel at fault; they should understand that their thoughts, feelings, or words did not cause the death of their pet.

"It's okay if you got mad at Socks. Your words or thoughts didn't hurt him."

Even if your child doesn't outwardly ask if they caused the death, it

doesn't hurt to simply say to them that they didn't cause it — the loss is nobody's fault. Sometimes children feel very guilty over death and won't outwardly tell us that they feel guilty. Adults should anticipate feelings of guilt and try and deal with them right away.

“It always helps to have people we love beside us when we have to do difficult things in life.”
— Mister Rogers



“You have left my life, but you will never leave my heart.”
— Author Unknown



Dealing with Grief: Developmental Stages

How a child or young person grieves when someone they love has died may depend on many different factors:

- Age
- Developmental stage
- Personality
- Ways they usually react to stress and emotion
- Relationship with the pet who has died
- Earlier experiences of death or loss
- Family circumstances
- How others around them are grieving
- Amount of support around them

Children and teenagers may need ongoing attention, reassurance and support – it is not unusual for grief about pet loss to resurface later on, even well after the death.

The following serve as general guidelines for the grieving process of children. Many children develop differently and you will need to follow the child's lead. How children cope with death and pet loss and how to talk to them about this loss will vary depending on their developmental stage and what their concept is of death and dying itself.

The following pages are dedicated to an overview of each developmental stage with information about a child's concept of death, grief response and reaction and how you can help.

Infants / Toddlers

Concept of Death: Infants and toddlers can and do grieve. The death of someone close to them can be an issue of separation and abandonment.

Grief Response/Reaction: Sleep disturbances, regressive behaviour, explosive emotions, irritability, crying, anxiousness, being clingy, jumpy and distressed.

How to Help: Use a reassuring, loving voice and gestures to show the child that someone is there to love and care for them. Maintain routine and normal activities as much as possible. Provide comfort items such as a cuddly toy, special blanket, etc.

Ages 3-5 (Preschoolers)

Concept of Death: Preschool-aged children do not understand that death is final. They know their pet is gone but believe it is a temporary situation. They have difficulty understanding "forever". Death is seen as being short-term or reversible. "Magical thinking" is common in this age group – children may believe their thoughts or actions are connected to illness or death.

Grief Response/Reaction: Fearfulness, anxiety, clinginess, being fretful, distressed and irritable. Children in this developmental

stage may have tantrums, withdraw, experience changes in eating, have difficulty sleeping, toileting problems and regression in progress (returning to crawling, wanting a bottle, etc.).

How to Help: Children in this group need reassurance someone is there to take care of them and provide security. Keep routine and normal activities as much as possible. Tell them they are safe, comfort them with hugs, cuddles and holding their hand. Encourage the expression of feelings through play to facilitate coping with what has happened – for example, use puppets, dolls, writing, drawing, painting, etc. Give simple and direct answers to questions about death. Read to the child from an age-appropriate book about death and loss. Provide reassurance and validation that their emotions are normal and okay.

Ages 6-8 (School Age Children)

Concept of Death: Children in this age group usually understand that death is final, but they have difficulty imagining it on a personal level and think it only happens to other people. They are typically very curious about illness and death and want details about physical changes that occur. They may visualize death as an angel, skeleton or monster and interpret illness as a scary creature or person who takes people or pets away. Children in this developmental stage may fear that death is contagious and believe that their thoughts cause events to happen.

Grief Response/Reaction: Children may ask where the pet is now and have blunt questions to ask about what happened to them and to their body. Expect questions about the physical

aspects of death, and don't be surprised if a child in this stage expresses anger at the pet for leaving them.

How to Help: Answer questions directly. Let them know that their pet loved them and it's okay to feel angry or any other emotion. They may blame themselves for the death. Frequently reassure them they are safe, keep routine, tell them you know they are sad, allow questions and provide honest answers. Explain death as a part of life. Encourage expression through play, which may help them cope with what has happened – for example, puppets, dolls, writing, drawing, painting, etc.

Ages 9-12 (Preteens)

Concept of Death: Preteens understand that death is final, personal and something that happens to everyone. Expect children in this age range to ask many questions and to have an almost morbid curiosity about death.

Grief Response/Reaction: Although they may appear to be coping well, preteens tend to keep many of their feelings hidden. They may worry about the effects the loss will have on their immediate future, fearing that the loss will set them apart as being different from their friends and school peers. They may also try to conceal their loss. Children in this age group may feel strong emotional reactions, such as anger, guilt and a sense of rejection.

How to Help: Give children in this stage the time and opportunity to talk, share, express themselves and ask questions. Provide time to talk with trusted adults when they need to and give regular reassurance and encouragement.

Ages 13-16 (Teenagers)

Concept of Death: By adolescence, death is accepted as a part of life, but it may not have affected a teenager personally yet.

Grief Response/Reaction: Because teenagers may not verbally express the intensity of their emotions, they are often mistakenly judged by their behavioural reactions to grief. They may attempt to mask their emotions from all but their closest friends. Although teenagers may refrain from emotions or expressions, studies show they often have more intense grief than any other age group.

How to Help: Since teenagers want to think of themselves as adults, it is important to encourage and respect their opinions and suggestions. Teens are forging their own identities and most may do so by pushing away their parents. That is normal. Losses may make teens feel more childlike and dependent, but may also feel required to step into an adult role. Talk to them about grief – what it is, that it's normal and that everyone is different when it comes to coping with it. Enlist their help in planning a memorial or something in which to remember or honour the loss. Being included in conversations and decisions about the end of their pet's life may help reduce their sense of isolation and facilitate coping.

“Grief doesn't have a plot. It isn't smooth. There is no beginning and middle and end.”
— Ann Hood



“Happiness can be found, even in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn to the light.” — J.K. Rowling



Remembering and Honouring Your Pet

Memories are the best legacies.

Pet owners may find it helpful to celebrate and honour the life of their pet. Decide how you will honour your pet's life and keep their memory alive. Place an emphasis on the happy experiences you shared together. Let children honour their pet in their own way, and encourage activities to help them experience and express their love and grief.

Examples may include drawing or painting pictures, compiling a photo album, scrapbook or memory box, watching videos, writing or sharing memories, planting a shrub or tree and reading books about pet loss. The idea of ritual around death can be very helpful and healing for families who have lost a pet.

For example: *“Every year at Christmas we hang a special ornament on our tree for our dog who died.”*

Here are some ways to engage children in a conversation to talk about memories of their pet:

“What is your favourite memory of Remy?”

“Daisy knows you loved her.”

“It’s okay to laugh and have fun as soon as you feel like it. It’s also okay to laugh and then cry immediately after. Our emotions are often all mixed up when we’re grieving and missing our pet that we loved so much.”

“Would you like to write a letter or a story, or draw a picture about the way you feel?”

The following are some ways that pet owners have found helpful in their journey of grieving and healing.

- Conduct a memorial service.
- Keep your pet’s tags, toys, collars, bedding, etc.
- Save sympathy and condolence cards and emails from family and friends.
- Create a picture collage, scrapbook, story or poem about your pet.

- Have a mold made of your pet's pawprint as a cherished keepsake. Veterinary hospitals may provide this service.
- Create a journal of your pet's story: how, when and where you met, unique personality traits, nicknames, what you loved the most and what you'll miss the most.
- Make or purchase a memory necklace with your pet's name to wear in honour of your pet.
- Donate time or money in your pet's honour to an animal charity.
- If you chose cremation, there are many options for how you can keep your pet's ashes. Your veterinarian is a great resource for what is available in your area.

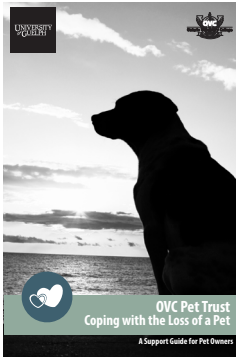
“A pet's love...never replaced, always remembered.”
— Anonymous



“Sometimes sad is very big. It’s everywhere. All over me...”
— Michael Rosen

Resources

Available in this series:



OVC Pet Trust: Coping with the Loss of a Pet – A Support Guide for Pet Owners



OVC Pet Trust: Preparing for the Loss of a Pet – A Support Guide for Pet Owners



OVC Pet Trust: Helping Children with the Loss of a Pet

A complete listing of pet loss support materials including: online communities; grief and bereavement resources; pet loss support groups; pet memorial; suggested pet loss books and other online reading materials are also available on our website. Books on pet loss for children can help parents narrate a story around pet illness and death.

www.pettrust.ca/petlossresources.



“The pain passes, but the beauty remains.” — Pierre Auguste Renoir



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OVC Pet Trust, founded in 1986 at the Ontario Veterinary College, University of Guelph, is Canada's first charitable fund dedicated to the health and well-being of companion animals.

OVC Pet Trust supports innovative discoveries that improve the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of diseases of pets. Funds raised also help provide the next generation of veterinary leaders with the most advanced knowledge, skills and techniques, as well as equipment and facilities for the Ontario Veterinary College.

OVC Pet Trust's Pet Memorial Program provides an opportunity for people to honour the special relationship they have with their pets.

**Learn about OVC Pet Trust at
www.pettrust.ca**

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