

Things to Remember

In talking to a child about the death of their beloved pet, it is important to use the correct terminology to describe what has happened. The use of the words “death,” “dead,” and “die” will not confuse the child as to the actuality of the event. Use of the words “sleeping,” “gone to the farm,” and “adopted by another family” will only create confusion and unresolved grief feelings for a child.

While it is hard to watch a child who is sad, a natural instinct may be to take the pain away by getting another pet. Allow the child ample time to grieve this loss, imparting that death is very much a part of life.

“Healthy children will not fear life if their elders have integrity enough not to fear death.”--Dr. Erik Erikson

“Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak whispers the o'er-fraught heart and bids it break.”

William Shakespeare



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What's My Role

As a companion assisting a child, it will be important to allow the child to “lead” the journey through the grief process. Children are natural mourners and will, in all actuality, teach us what they will need to mourn.

Children will mourn in doses and will have sadness spurts. They will mourn, then play, mourn some more, then play again. While this may seem like they are being disrespectful to other’s feelings of sadness, it is a very healthy way for youngsters to move themselves through to grief reconciliation.

Your role as an adult caregiver is to allow the child the space to grieve in his/her own way. A child will not grieve in the same way as an adult and should not be expected to.

Your most important role - to model your grieving behavior in a way that children will feel safe and comfortable to express their feelings. Adults are a barometer as to how children will grieve and will follow the lead that they are given.



How to Help

Children will not want to say good-bye to their beloved pet. They will first want to be given a chance to remember their pet and to relive the life that was shared. This process will be an integral part for them to move themselves through the grief journey to saying “good-bye.”

In assisting a child through these emotions, a child will guide you in what help they need. They will let you know when they are ready to talk, cry or show other emotions. Forcing a child into talking about these feelings or forcing a prescribed set of steps onto a child will create some resistance. As a model of healthy grieving, you as the companioning adult will allow the child to physically SEE a healthy way of grieving, therefore, creating the environment that they will need in mourning as well.

In this process of reliving the life that was shared, these are some things that you can do to assist the child:

- Allow the child to see you cry and to be sad. While many people think that not allowing a child to see this is showing a sign of strength, it is actually showing a sign of weakness in not being able to show emotions. A child will WANT to see these emotions.



- Set up a table in your home to display items that were important to your pet and the life that was shared. The "Tribute Table" will provide an active place for your child to place items that were special to the deceased pet and to the life that was shared with the family. Items to guide the child to include on the table could include toys, treats, flowers, photos, blankets, etc.

- At a designated period following the death of the pet, assist the child in arranging a memorial service to pay tribute to the pet. Let the child assist you in deciding on the readings, poems, letters, music, etc. that will play a part of the service.

- Plant a flower or tree in memory of the pet. Place a rock or marker at this spot.

- Create a personalized marker to place in the yard, complete with the child’s nickname for the pet.

- Assist the child in creating a journal, scrapbook or photo album.

- Allow the child to participate in the final arrangements of the pet’s body.

- As a family, organize a donation drive for a local pet shelter in memory of your pet.