



Shiri R. Joshua, M.A.(Psych) © 2009

## Ages & stages of a child's understanding of pet loss and how to help them

**Infancy to early toddlerhood** - No cognitive experience of death and dying. May however respond to emotional states of parents or siblings. **Be mindful yet authentic in your own reaction. Take time to grieve and still allow child to feel safe and secure in your attachment as much as possible.**

**Toddler to four years** - No real grasp of death as final, irreversible. Sees the event as temporary. (many children at this age actually experience seeing or sensing the animal still around them. Encourage this, rather than dispute as abnormal!). **Explain death as it really is with honesty: “Fluffy is dead. He can't eat, breathe, or play. He can't come home or sleep by your bed anymore.” Do not use complex language or concepts. Use one word rather than many (“died” OR “dead”). You may need to repeat this a number of times.**

**Preschool: Four to Seven years** – Still no concept of “forever” but an attempt to comprehend the situation. May engage in “morbid play,” “morbid questions,” or interpret the situation through their young minds (“fluffy died because he didn't eat his vegetables”). Family ceremony or a goodbye ritual is recommended! **Avoid complicated metaphors of “God wanted fluffy in heaven” or “Fluffy went to sleep forever in the clouds” this would confuse the child**

**School years: Seven to Nine years** – At this stage children have greater reason and accept that death indeed is irreversible and permanent, along with the understanding of the biological explanation of the process of dying. Normal grieving behavior includes crying, wishing to be on their own, reflect through drawing or play with friends. **Appropriate stage to allow the child to participate in euthanasia (depending on maturity level) and to help plan a memorial, a special plant, or donate to a shelter on behalf of the beloved family pet.**

**Teen years to young adulthood** – Able to have a grasp of death similar to adults in terms of its irreversibility, universality, and permanency. At this stage the teen or young adult may become more fascinated with death and dying, almost romanticizing the mystic aspect of after life through music, books, and certain social groups. May also challenge death by engaging in “risky behaviours,” especially if unable to openly express emotions or talk about their feelings at home. **Despite many teens' wish to “be left alone” and not talk, there often is a yearning to be listened to, even in silence! Be honest, open, respect their wish for privacy yet offer a listening ear, or simply be there as support...**