

Children and Pet Loss:

How to help your Child or Teen cope with the loss of the family's pet

Shiri R. Joshua, M.A.

Centre for Human and Animal Healing

www.ShiriJoshua.com

When faced with the decision to say goodbye to the family's beloved pet, many well meaning parents feel the need to protect their children from the pain and sorrow of grief, and search for ways to spare the news from their children. The truth is, that pet loss is no different than any other type of loss; be it a human family member, switching to a new school - a pet that has been the provider of comfort, humor, and unconditional acceptance for many years or months is hard to say goodbye to. Thus, when the time comes to deal with such devastating news or decision, many parents prefer to adopt a new pet either before or immediately following the death or loss. This tends to result in finding that the new relationship does not help heal the pain; instead masking it with the novelty of a new pet, which normally wears off shortly thereafter.

What parents should know about death and grief:

In many families, the issue of death and dying is still considered somewhat of a Taboo that is not openly discussed or talked about. ***Sadly, death and loss are unavoidable!*** Everyone is touched by some form of loss, grief, and death in their lives, and when issues of death are kept unspoken, it grows into a "mysterious monster." Many children grow up with a misconception or lack of understanding of the entire subject of life and death. They may learn to either shun away from it completely due to fear and anxiety of the "big unknown," or develop their own means for understanding the experience of death while utilizing their rich imagination. Young children are "egocentric" in the sense that they tend to take on the assumption that events in their world are happening as a result of something they did themselves or perhaps something they haven't done; this often leads to decreased self esteem, anxiety and fear, and self-blame.

The Loss of a pet: Implications and tools to help your child:

The loss of a pet, devastating and painful as it normally is, many times becomes the very first experience or "taste" children have with the cycle of life and death. This event thus serves as a ***window of opportunity*** for family discussions on issues related to thoughts and feelings about death, dying, endings, and expected grief reactions. Children will likely want to make sure that they are **SAFE** and that **their parents are OK, despite being sad.**

They will likely ask questions such as:

- What is death?
- Why did my pet have to die (or is going to die)?
- Where does his/her body go when he/she dies?
- What are the ashes made of?

- Will I ever see him/her again?
- Is it my fault? (*please note: children may or may not ask this question, but it is always a good idea to directly let them know that it isn't their fault, as young children may automatically assume responsibility over events that happen in their lives*)
- Am I going to die?
- Are you going to die?
- If I am good will my pet come back to me?

In talking to your child or teen about death and pet loss here are some concrete tools and suggestions you might find helpful:

- **Examine how you feel about death and dying:** What were you told about death and dying as a child? If you are uncomfortable with the subject, or grew up believing that this subject is best left unspoken of, know that your energy field or your unconscious mind will show it, and may imply to your child that it isn't safe to talk about this issue as well. Consider challenging your beliefs, consulting a book or seeking the help of a professional counsellor who specializes in pet loss or grief counselling (for a list of professionals in your area please see: <http://www.petlossupport.ca/counsellors.php>)
- **BE HONEST – in your verbal *and* non verbal communication:** While they do not need to know the fine minute details of the dying process, children and teens are extremely sensitive to the energy of truth, and any dissonance between your words and your body language. They will know if you are attempting to say something in order to avoid telling them the truth, or to spare them from pain (they may not appreciate your kind motivation).
- **Offer plenty of reassurance:** Children can handle the truth and any emotional reaction as long as they know that: *they are safe and ok* and that *you are safe and ok* although sad and in pain (as their protector). Let your child know that grief is a natural reaction to death, endings, or any type of loss. Saying something such as “Mommy is very sad and crying because I miss Spot, and when someone dies it is OK to cry, but I will be ok soon.”
- **Watch for cues from your child:** Depending on your child's age and maturity level, you can determine how much you feel they can take in at once. Young children tend to wish for simple, short, and a small amount of information. They will likely come back for more once they feel they have “digested” the information in their minds.
- **Teenagers and adults** are likely to want to know ‘everything’ and are usually able to take in the information as it is explained to them. Teens may or may not show their emotions openly. Be patient. Let them know that you are here for them if they wish to share how they are feeling. Understand that they may feel more comfortable sharing with their friends than with you at this phase in their lives; however they will still appreciate your honest and open communication about your own experience of grief.

- **Avoid vague words** such as “Spot went to sleep,” “Went away,” “Passed away...” Children may not understand these abstract euphemisms or may confuse the natural process of sleep and wake, with the finality of death and dying. You may find that your child refuses to go to bed from now on, and may develop a sleep disorder out of fear that the same final fate will find them also.
- **God or not God:** Many parents (regardless of religious background) may wish to share with their child that “God has taken her / him away.” Children may not have the same grasp of the concept of God yet, and may develop feelings of self blame (“God took her away because I was bad”), targeted anger (“why would God do such a thing to me?”), or a sense of helplessness in the face of a punitive almighty source. If choosing to have a religious component to your communication with your child or teen, you may wish to seek advice from your rabbi, priest, or other spiritual leader in your community to understand how to safely explain to your child issues of death, dying, bodily matters, reincarnation of the soul, and such.
- **Create a memorial or ritual for the family:** Have your child or teen suggest a number of ideas where you could all participate in a family ritual to celebrate the life of your beloved pet together. Some suggestions include: Creating a photo album, planting a special plant (such as tulips, which blossom every year as a nice reminder), burial or spreading of the ashes at a specially chosen field, lake or river, etc.

In summary

Depending on their physical and intellectual age, children experience the same range of emotions to death, loss, and other ‘endings’ as adults do, some of which are anger, sadness, denial, shock, guilt, or disbelief. For many children, the loss of a pet is the very first encounter they may have with topics such as the circle of life, birth, and death. If used wisely, this painful time can become a *window of opportunity* for the family to discuss such matters, and to teach their children the value of gratitude, appreciating life, true and authentic communication (both verbally and emotionally), and perhaps reduce the anxiety associated with the normal process of dying and bereavement.

Getting a new pet is certainly an option, however it isn’t recommended that a family does so immediately or too soon following a death of their pet; to avoid confusion that the new pet is acting as a replacement or distraction from the mourning process.

Child’s play

Sometimes children choose to show their emotions or make sense of the information given to them through play. Some activities can be played together as a family, such as drawing a picture of a favorite memory of the beloved pet. Other times a young child (usually around the age of 3 or 4) may choose to play “death games” such as burying items in the sand in order to make sense of the burial process they may have been exposed to. Please note that these and other games are perfectly

normal, however they are best utilized for the benefit of the child's psychological wellbeing and development only if they are talked about with the child. If you feel comfortable to discuss with your child the nature of their play or drawing, you may wish to ask: what is the nature of her play? What is going on? Who is involved? What went through the figurine's mind? (Children sometimes choose to externalize their feelings by pretending that the figurine they are playing with is themselves), or any other question that may lead to an open discussion about the child's feelings.

For more information please see the following resources:

- *Grieving the death of a pet*: B. J. Carmack (2003), Augsburg Fortress.
- *Saying Goodbye to the Pet You Love: A complete Resource to help you heal*. L. A. Greene, Ph.D, & J. Landis (2002), New Harbinger Publications Inc.
- *When Children Grieve*: J.W. James, & R. Friedman (2001) HarperCollins Pub.
- *The Loss of a Pet: A guide to coping with the grieving process when a pet dies*. W. Sife, Ph.D (1998), Howell Book House, Wiley Publishing, Inc
- *When Friendship Lives Beyond the Stars: A resource Book to help children cope with the death of a pet*. Dr. A.Sugar, BSc, DVM. (2004) www.PawsitiveResources.com
- *When your Pet Dies: A guide to mourning, remembering, and healing*. Alan D. Wlfelt, Ph.D. (2004), Companion Press
- *American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry: Facts for Families*:
http://www.aacap.org/cs/root/facts_for_families/facts_for_families