

Helping Children Cope with Pet Loss

Helping your child understand and accept that the time has come to help his/her pet pass away is a very important and often difficult thing to do. It is natural for parents to want to protect their children from grief, but in doing this, we miss the opportunity to teach a valuable lesson about coping with the painful reality of death.

Pets are often considered our children’s best friends, confidants and playmates. The pain a child feels at the loss of a pet can result in feelings of insecurity, anxiety, anger, guilt, helplessness, distrust and fear. Preparing your child for the loss of a pet can help him/her more easily cope with these feelings.

**How can I help my child cope with euthanasia?**

* Be open and honest. Tell your child as soon as you know what is going to happen so he/she does not hear it from anyone else.
* Inform others, like teachers or friends, about what is going on in your child’s life so that they can offer support and understanding.
* Avoid using the phrase “put to sleep” as this can be confusing and misleading to a child who assumes that when we sleep, we will wake up again.
* Offer explanations and be available to answer questions, but be careful not to tell your child more than he/she wants to know. Do not go into detail unless he/she asks.
* Let your child know that grief is normal and that it is okay to cry and feel sad.
* Do not put a time limit on your child’s grief. If your child does not seem to be feeling better in three to six months, consult a pediatrician or mental health professional for further guidance.
* Explain to your child that adults feel sad, too. Children will often blame themselves for a parent’s sadness. Make sure your child understands that it is the pet’s death that is making you sad and not something he/she did.
* Help young children understand why euthanasia is necessary. For example, you might say, “Fluffy’s body is so old that is just won’t work anymore.”
* If your child old enough to understand, include him/her in the decision-making process. This will give your child the opportunity to say goodbye and make the most of the time he/she has left with the pet.
* Do not force your child to present during euthanasia. Many children are not psychologically ready for this kind of experience. If your child wants to be present, make sure he/she understands that he/she is helping the pet die with dignity. You must also make sure your child understands what will happen during the procedure. This is not recommended for young children; however, regardless of the age of the child, know that having your children present will change the experience for you, too.
* Hold a memorial service for your pet that the whole family can participate in.
* Do not welcome another pet into your home too soon. It is important to give children (and yourself) time to work through the grieving process. This time of mourning can also bring your family closer together.

**How can I help my child to remember his/her pet?**

Guide your child through the grieving process with these suggestions:

* Encourage your child to draw or write about his/her pet. Ask your child to describe the pet’s personality or share a special memory. You may also ask questions such as, “What do you miss most about Fluffy? What did you learn from him/her?”
* Help your child collect photos and mementos of his/her pet for a scrapbook or memory box.
* Assist your child in memorializing the pet by making a donation or planting a tree or bush in his/her memory.