

Understanding Grief in Children

**Grief management in children**

The death of a cherished pet creates a sense of loss for adults and produces a predictable chain of emotions. The stages of grief are typically denial, sadness, depression, guilt, anger, and finally, relief (or recovery). However, the effects on children can widely vary depending upon the child's age and maturity level. The basis for a child's reaction is his/her ability to understand death.

**Ages 2 to 3**

Two- and three-year-olds typically have no understanding of death. Instead, they often consider it a form of sleep. A child at this age should be told that his/her pet has died and will not return. Common reactions to this include temporary loss of speech and generalized distress. The child should be reassured that the pet's failure to return is unrelated to anything the child may have said or done. Typically, a child in this age range will readily accept another pet in place of the dead one.

**Ages 4 to 6**

Children in this age range have some understanding of death, but often in a way that relates to a continued existence. The pet may be considered to be living underground while continuing to eat, breathe and play. Alternatively, it may be considered asleep. A return to life may be expected if the child views death as temporary.

A child at this age may feel that any anger he/she had toward the animal may be responsible for the pet's death. It is especially important that this belief is refuted, because it can also translate to the death of family members. A child at this age may also see death as contagious and begin to fear that their own death (or that of others) is imminent. The child should be reassured that his/her death is not likely.

In addition, manifestations of grief often take the form of disturbances in bladder and bowel control, eating and sleeping at this age. This is best managed by parent-child discussions that allow the child to express his/her feelings and concerns. Several brief discussions are generally more productive than one or two prolonged sessions.

**Ages 7 to 9**

The irreversibility of death becomes real to children in this age range. A child at this age usually does not personalize death, thinking it cannot happen to him/her. However, he/she may develop concerns about the death of parents or other family members. The child may also become very curious about death and its implications. Parents should be ready to respond frankly and honestly to any questions that may arise.

Several manifestations of grief may occur in a child in this age range, including the development of school problems, learning problems, antisocial behavior, hypochondriacal concerns or aggression. Additionally, withdrawal, over-attentiveness or clinging behavior may be seen. Based on the reactions to the loss of parents or siblings, it is likely that these symptoms may not occur immediately but several weeks or months later.

**Ages 10 to 11**

Children in this age range generally understand death as natural, inevitable and universal. As a result, these children often react to death in a manner very similar to adults.

**Adolescents**

Although this age group also typically reacts to death in the same way as adults, many adolescents may exhibit various forms of denial. This usually results in a lack of emotional display, meaning these children experience sincere grief without any outward manifestations.