

CHILDREN AND PET LOSS

Children and pets often forge a deep, powerful lifelong bond and share a very special and meaningful relationship. They are best friends as well as companions who spend quality time with each other playing, exercising, watching television and listening to the radio, interacting with friends and other family members, sleeping, spending holidays and even vacations together! It is increasingly common to regard and treat our pets as beloved “family members”, and children are usually delighted to have this non-threatening, non-combative “sibling”. Children seem to understand that their animal companions love them just as they are and that they don’t need to pretend to be someone they are not, or to look or dress a certain way. Kids can just be themselves.

Children trust their animal companions and confide in them. They share their goals, dreams, secrets and confidences knowing that the pet will never betray – or judge – them. Children let down their guard and express their true feelings with a pet without fear of being dismissed, misunderstood, judged, blamed or criticized. They share a large portion of their lives, which they could not or would not share with other human beings.

The loss of a beloved animal companion is often the first significant loss a child experiences. Although the child may lose a relative – or friend – the impact of this kind of loss is not nearly as devastating as is the loss of one who is trustworthy, devoted and unconditionally loving and has always “been there” for him. Like adults, children grieve, and each child grieves differently and for a different period of time. Some children will withdraw or isolate and become quiet and pensive. Others may become angry and “act out”. Others will not be able to focus or concentrate on homework and other tasks. Their grief depends on the depth and intensity of the relationship they had with the deceased pet. It may also depend on how many previous losses they have experienced. Like adults, children should be encouraged to understand – to identify- that they are grieving and to express their genuine feelings openly and honestly.

Adults should encourage children to discuss their feelings. Adults can offer sympathy, empathy and support, and can help children to understand that their feelings are normal – that it is natural and healthy to grieve losses of any kind. Holding a funeral or memorial service and eulogizing the pet with friends and family members are helpful. Whenever possible, it is advisable to be factual and concrete. Reading books together about pet loss is also beneficial. Encourage the child to express her feelings by writing or singing or drawing the pet or putting together a photo album. The loss of a loved animal companion affords parents a wonderful opportunity to introduce children to the concepts of birth and death and the circle and cycles of life. Children should be encouraged to mourn, honor, and celebrate their pet’s life, and if, and when they are ready, to adopt another wonderful animal companion.

Bio: Dr. Diane Pomerance is an internationally recognized animal expert and Grief Recovery Specialist. She has written numerous books and articles and appeared on many national television and radio programs.