

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH THE LOSS OF A PET

By

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Children and pets share a very special bond. Pets are loving and affectionate and fun to play with. Pets provide entertainment, companionship, friendship and camaraderie. They are privy to children's deepest feelings and secrets. They never blame or yell at children; rather, they offer unconditional love, loyalty and affection. They do not judge, and they always forgive...They offer a safe haven and a zone of comfort and security wherein children are able to let down their guard and be themselves without experiencing worry or anxiety about failing or being judged.

Children not only play with their pets, but also spend quality time with them. The pet is present during many of a child's most precious and memorable occasions. Children and pets watch TV together; do homework together; go on walks together, eat meals together, spend birthdays and holidays together – they may even sleep together. It is of no importance to the pet what a child is wearing, how attractive he or she is, how shy or outgoing or how intelligent he or she is. The pet loves the child no matter what. The mere act of stroking a pet offers children as well as adults decreased stress, anxiety, frustration and depression.

For many children, the loss of a beloved companion animal is the first profound and significant loss they experience. Depending upon the intensity of the relationship shared between the child and animal, this loss can be very painful, even devastating to a child. The child may experience emotions he has never before felt and be unable to cope with these feelings. He may feel, sad, lonely, angry, hurt, guilty, anxious, frustrated and depressed all at the same time. He may have many questions about the death of his animal friend. For example, "why did my pet die?" "why couldn't I or my parents or the vet save him?" "What happens when a pet or a human dies?" "What was the purpose of my pet's life?" "Will I ever see my pet again?" "Will my pet go to heaven?"

It is always best to offer sympathy, compassion and empathy for the child, and to discuss the pet's death as honestly and straightforwardly as possible. You may wish to view the pet's death as an opportunity to discuss life and death and religion and spirituality with your child. It is important to teach the child that death is not "bad" or to be feared – simply an inevitable experience of all living creatures that are born and a part of the cycle of life. An analogy as to the changing seasons may help the child to relate to the different phases of life; spring for the birth of life; summer for life's flourishing; autumn for the harvest or waning of life; winter as death.

It is rarely, if ever, a good idea to protect or shield the child from the truth. Inevitably, the child will experience loss many times throughout his life, and it is wise to provide him with the tools that will enable him to cope with and recover from grief. It is helpful to

teach the child to openly and honestly express his feelings without fear of being judged or ridiculed. Grief is the normal, healthy and natural response to loss. There is nothing wrong with feeling sad or shedding tears. Tears are healing for boys and girls, and no one should be made to feel ashamed or embarrassed to cry.

A grieving child seldom displays or reveals the depth or degree of sorrow and suffering she is experiencing. But be on the alert for behavioral changes – isolation, secretiveness, acting out in anger, short temper, impatience, etc. Any dramatic behavioral change should be noted and addressed. It is extremely helpful to encourage the child to speak/express her feelings whatever they may be in as comfortable, nonjudgmental and supportive environment as possible. Refrain from blame or criticism; allow the child to tell you the truth. Let the child know that you, too, loved and are missing the pet. If you have ever lost a pet, you might wish to share your grieving experience with your child.

Conduct a memorial service and funeral involving the entire family. Each family member can eulogize the pet – what happy moments did you share? What did you and your child learn from the animal companion – from your relationship with him? What qualities about your pet did you admire? Remember the happy times you shared.

Encourage your child to ask questions and to discuss them not only with the family, but also in school, in church or synagogue, with grief counselors, etc. Suggest that the child express his feelings verbally, as well as write to or about the pet, draw pictures of the pet, make a photo album of the special times you spent together, sing a song about the pet, do a dance for the pet, etc. and share this with others who are sympathetic. Above all, encourage your child to mourn the pet, and then, celebrate the beautiful relationship he shared with the animal

Use the experience of the loss of a pet to teach your child that loss is inevitable – that he will experience many types of loss throughout his life such as loss of a parent, divorce or separation of parents, graduation, moving from one place to another, loss of safety, off of troops in a war; loss of trust, loss of public heroes and leaders (i.e. President Reagan); etc. Your child can effectively cope with and recover from grief by identifying that he is grieving, by expressing his grief truthfully, unashamedly and openly with friends and family members who are sympathetic, and by recognizing that life is ephemeral and to be fully lived, valued and appreciated. Teach him that the memory of a life well lived and the love, joy and knowledge one acquires through a relationship with a beloved animal companion is precious, everlasting and irreplaceable.