

## HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH THE LOSS OF A PET

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 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

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 who 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