

WHEN YOUR CHILD'S PET DIES

Children and pets share a very special relationship. They are friends, playmates, confidants and even “siblings”. Children trust and are comfortable around their pets – often they share their deepest feelings and secrets, and their animal companions offer them total acceptance, forgiveness, understanding and unconditional love.

Often the death of a pet is the first painful and significant loss a child experiences. It is also perhaps the first opportunity for a child's parent to teach her the tools to identify, cope with and recover from the grief and loss she will experience many, many times throughout her life. After all, loss is an inevitable part of the experience of life on earth.

Most importantly, a parent needs to understand that grief is the normal, natural and healthy response to loss of any kind. A child needs special attention, empathy, patience and compassion from the parent, and the parent needs to encourage and initiate frank, straightforward discussion with the child as to her feelings. Is the child sad? Angry? Confused? Resentful? Hurt? Lonely? Guilty? Depressed? Anxious? It is important to create a safe, supportive environment in which the child can freely express his feelings. By providing the opportunity for the child to communicate honestly and openly, you are helping to establish a solid foundation for his ability to deal with painful events for the rest of his life.

Some helpful tips for helping the grieving child include:

- Give the child permission to work through his grief;
- Discuss death, dying and grief honestly – death is not “bad” – it, along with birth, are inevitable; analogous to the change of seasons i.e. spring, fall, summer, winter;
- Never say things like “God took your pet” or “the pet was put to sleep”. The child will learn to fear God and become afraid to go to sleep;
- Include the child in everything that is going on;
- Have a ceremony (funeral, memorial service) in the pet's honor in which the child participates and eulogizes the pet;
- Encourage the child to read about pet loss and to ask his librarian to recommend books on the subject;
- Encourage the child to write to or about his pet, create a photo album, draw a picture, etc.

Finally, and most importantly, encourage the child to recognize that the special love and relationship he shared with his pet will live in his heart forever...