

FACTS *for* FAMILIES

No. 78

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WHEN A PET DIES

For many children, their first real experience with loss occurs when a pet dies. When a pet dies, children need consolation, love, support, and affection more than they need complicated medical or scientific explanations. Children's reactions to the death of a pet will depend upon their age and developmental level. Children three to five years of age see death as temporary and potentially reversible. Between ages six and eight children begin to develop a more realistic understanding of the nature and consequences of death. Generally, it is not until nine years of age that children fully understand that death is permanent and final. For this reason, very young children should be told that when a pet dies, it stops moving, doesn't see or hear anymore, and won't wake up again. They may need to have this explanation repeated to them several times.

There are many ways parents can tell their children that a pet has died. It is often helpful to make children as comfortable as possible (use a soothing voice, hold their hand or put an arm around them) and to tell them in a familiar setting. It is also important to be honest when telling children that a pet has died. Trying to protect children with vague or inaccurate explanations can create anxiety, confusion, and mistrust.

Children often have questions after a pet dies, including: Why did my pet die? Is it my fault? Where does my pet's body go? Will I ever see my pet again? If I wish hard and am really good can I make my pet come back? Does death last forever? It is important to answer such questions simply, but honestly.

Children may experience sadness, anger, fear, denial, and guilt when their pet dies. They may also be jealous of friends with pets.

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When a pet is sick or dying, spend time talking with your child about his/her feelings. If possible, it is helpful to have the child say goodbye before the pet dies. Parents can serve as models by sharing their feelings with their children. Let your child know it is normal to miss pets after they die and encourage the youngster to come to you with questions or for reassurance and comfort.

There is no best way for children to mourn their pets. They need to be given time to remember their pets. It helps to talk about the pet with friends and family. Mourning a pet has to be done in a child’s own way. After a pet has died, children may want to bury the pet, make a memorial, or have a ceremony. Other children may write poems and stories, or make drawings of the pet. It is usually best not to immediately replace the pet that has died.

The death of a pet may cause a child to remember other painful losses, or upsetting events. A child who appears to be overwhelmed by their grief and not able to function in their normal routine may benefit from an evaluation by a child and adolescent psychiatrist or other qualified mental health professional.

For more information see *Facts for Families*: #08 Children and Grief and #74 Children and Pets, and #4 The Depressed Child. See also: *Your Child* (1998 Harper Collins)/ *Your Adolescent* (1999 Harper Collins) and *Good Grief* (1996 Jessica Kingsley).

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