

Helping a child cope with pet loss

The loss of a pet may be your child's first experience of death—and your first opportunity to teach them about coping with the grief and pain that inevitably accompanies the joy of loving another living creature. Losing a pet can be a traumatic experience for any child. Many kids love their pets very deeply and some may not even remember a time in their life when the pet wasn't around. A child may feel angry and blame themselves—or you—for the pet's death. A child may feel scared that other people or animals they love may also leave them. How you handle the grieving process can determine whether the experience has a positive or negative effect on your child's personal development.

Some parents feel they should try to shield their children from the sadness of losing a pet by either not talking about the pet's death, or by not being honest about what's happened. Pretending the animal ran away, or "went to sleep," for example, can leave a child feeling even more confused, frightened, and betrayed when they finally learn the truth. It's far better to be honest with children and allow them the opportunity to grieve in their own way.

Tips for helping a child cope with the loss of a pet

- **Let your child see you express your own grief at the loss of the pet.** If you don't experience the same sense of loss as your child, respect their grief and let them express their feelings openly, without making them feel ashamed or guilty. Children should feel proud that they have so much compassion and care deeply about their animal companions.
- **Reassure your child** that they weren't responsible for the pet's death. The death of a pet can raise a lot of questions and fears in a child. You may need to reassure your child that you, their parents, are not also likely to die. It's important to talk about all their feelings and concerns.
- **Involve your child in the dying process.** If you've chosen euthanasia for your pet, be honest with your child. Explain why the choice is necessary and give the child chance to spend some special time with the pet and say goodbye in his or her own way.
- **If possible, give the child an opportunity to create a memento of the pet.** This could be a special photograph, or a plaster cast of the animal's paw print, for example.
- **Allow the child to be involved in any memorial service,** if they desire. Holding a funeral or creating a memorial for the pet can help your child express their feelings openly and help process the loss.
- **Do not rush out to get the child a "replacement pet"** before they have had chance to grieve the loss they feel. Your child may feel disloyal, or you could send the message that the grief and sadness felt when something dies can simply be overcome by buying a replacement.