

# How to help kids cope with the loss of a pet

## Article from the Hamilton Spectator by Jennifer Chung



### **BURIAL**

Getty said 'Younger kids may find comfort in holding a memorial service for their pet'.

One of the most difficult parts of losing a family pet is breaking the news to the kids. Choose a private place to tell the kids about the loss where they feel safe to express emotions. Base the amount of details you share about the situation on their age and let their questions be your guide. Check out

these tips for helping kids understand and cope with the loss of a furry family member.

**Older pets** — If you have an older pet who is dealing with ongoing health issues, plant the seed that animals age and will eventually die. If your pet is suffering, consider putting together a plan for euthanizing. Managing how the pet dies can be comforting for kids.

Use words like “death” and “dying” to your kids. Walk them through the process:

- The vet will give him a shot.
- He will go to sleep.
- His heart will stop beating.
- Avoid saying the pet just went to sleep. Kids can be very literal and develop misconceptions about people going to sleep and not waking up.
- If your pet died in an accident it is important to convey:
  - The vet did everything he could to save the pet.
  - Due to his injuries, the pet would only suffer if she were kept alive.
  - Letting him go was the kindest thing that could be done for him.
  - The pet died without feeling pain or being scared.

## **How to tell kids of different ages about the death of a pet**

**Two to three year olds** don't have a lot of life experience to draw on to fully understand death. Keep it simple. Tell them the pet died and won't be coming home. Reassure them it wasn't their fault. They will copy your emotions and behaviour. It is good to cry and model grieving for them, but keep things controlled. Children at this age normally accept the death easily.

**Four to six year olds** usually understand the concept of death, but may not totally grasp its permanence. They may feel that past anger toward the pet was responsible, so it's important to tell them how the pet died. Some kids may regress to having potty accidents, difficulty sleeping or lack of appetite. Allow your child to discuss his feelings and reassure him it's normal to grieve. Encourage him to draw pictures, write stories and even hold a memorial service.

**Seven to nine year olds** understand that death is irreversible. They are curious and may ask questions that appear morbid. These types of questions are normal and should be addressed honestly. They may manifest their grief through clingy behaviour, aggression or even through problems at school. Reassure them they did not do anything to contribute to the death of the pet.

**Ten to 11 year olds** understand that the circle of life and death is a natural process. They usually exhibit their grief in ways they have seen their parents deal with it in the past. The death of a pet can spur memories of precious losses, allow your kids to talk through it. Reassure them this is normal.

**Teens** generally will react in ways adults do. If their friends and family are supportive of the loss they typically will do fine. Hormones can play a part in how they handle grief, one day they may appear unaffected and the next they may feel wrought with grief.

**Young adults** may feel guilt for moving away to college or getting married. They may take the loss harder than expected as they may feel bad for not being there to say goodbye.

### **Help them grieve**

Don't hide your own sadness about the loss of the pet. Kids of all ages will go through a range of emotions after the death, from sadness to loneliness, and maybe even anger. Give them freedom to express their pain. Comfort them and validate their feelings.

Find special ways to remember their pet. Younger kids may find comfort in holding a memorial service. Allow them to write a speech to share how special this pet was to them and share good memories. Planting a tree or plant in their honour will keep the memory alive.

### **Buying a new pet**

There is no right or wrong time to get a new pet. Everyone deals with grief in their own way and it is important to complete the grieving process before bringing a new pet into the

home. The time will be right when you feel like your family can look forward to building a new relationship with a pet and not constantly look back at the previous relationship.

**Things to consider when getting a new pet:**

- Don't think of the new pet as a "replacement" for your previous pet. Think of her as a new pet with whom your family will build a new relationship.
- Don't get a look-a-like pet. Try a different sex, breed or one who has different markings. Having a pet that looks similar may set the expectation they he will have the same personality.
- Involve the entire family when choosing the new pet. Be sure everyone is ready to take on the responsibility. Take into consideration other pets in the family and if they are ready to welcome a new member into the home.
- Pets become a part of the family over time. Kids grow deep attachments to their furry friends and letting go can take time. Death and dying is never easy to discuss, be compassionate when breaking the news and allow them to control the dialogue.