

Supporting the Whole Family Through the Loss of an Animal Companion

Supporting Your Child



Children and Loss

Children grieve differently from adults, and their grief will look different depending on their age. Regardless of age, it is important to:

- Be honest about the death of their animal.
- Adjust the conversation depending on your child's developmental stage.
- Use concrete and easy to understand language and avoid euphemisms about death.
- Periodically revisit the conversation with your child so they can ask questions or share feelings as they come up.

Watch for Signs

Children haven't yet developed the beliefs and fears that adults have about death, so be prepared for some questions from your child about the death process. Your child may seem to accept the news of their animal's death very easily, but be watchful: children often grieve in seemingly random bursts or through play. You may observe the impact of the loss through behavior changes such as:

- Irritability
- Regression (i.e. wetting the bed after being potty trained)
- Dwelling on certain aspects of the death story

Consult your pediatrician if any changes seem drastic or prolonged. As much as possible, stick to your usual routines such as meal times, wake-up and bedtime, and school or day care.

Brief Guide to Talking With Your Child

Use this guide, including example phrases and explanations, to make talking with your child about your animal's death easier.

Assess Understanding

Find out what your child already knows about what happened by asking the following:

- "Do you know what happened to [animal's name]?"
- "Do you know why Mom/Dad is so sad today?"

Get a sense of how interested they are in talking about it by paying attention to whether your child is engaged or distracted by the conversation.

Explain the Death

Use clear language to explain what happened and why. The following are example phrases that may be useful starting points:

- "He was very sick and the medications stopped helping him."
- "Her body stopped working and she died."
- "He was very old and his body became worn out."
- "Her heart and lungs stopped working."
- "He is dead and won't be alive again."
- "She isn't in pain. She can't feel anything anymore."
- "All animals die. Most animals don't live as long as people do."

Avoid Euphemisms

Children may be confused by euphemisms or misunderstand their meaning, which could lead to worry or self-blame. Avoid the following phrases when talking with your child:

- “Put to sleep” or “will sleep forever”
- “Gone to a better place”
- “Passed away”
- “Left us”
- “We lost him”

Offer Reassurance

Any death can be unsettling to a child, so it's important to provide frequent reassurance. Though it may seem obvious to you, making sure you communicate the following points can help your child feel safe and secure:

- Explain that the animal's death was not their fault by using a phrase such as: “your thoughts/feelings didn't hurt [animal's name].”
- Tell your child they are safe.
- Reassure your child that you and other family members aren't going to leave them or die (unless there is an immediate reason this isn't true).
- Explain that the animal didn't choose to die.
- If you're having a funeral or memorial service, explain what will happen during the event.
- When talking about a burial, try saying: “We will bury [animal's name] in the ground.”
- If the animal will be cremated, try saying: “His body will go into a small, very hot room. The heat will turn his body to ashes, which look like gray sand.”

Helping Your Child

You can help your child deal with their grief and be a model for them by doing the following:

- If school-age or younger, share with teachers or other adults in their life that your family is grieving over an animal companion.
- Model that it's okay to feel sad, angry, shocked, or lonely by letting yourself grieve in front of your child.
- Share how you're feeling with your child.
- Read a book about pet loss with your child. Be sure to read any book by yourself first so you're prepared for any emotions or questions that might come up.

Recommended Books

- *When a Pet Dies*, by Fred Rogers
- *Dog Heaven and Cat Heaven*, by Cynthia Rylant
- *The Tenth Good Thing about Barney*, by Judith Viorst
- *Healing your Grieving Heart for Kids*, by Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt
- *My Pet Died: A Coloring Book for Grieving Children*, by Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt
- *Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children*, by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen

For more information and other resources for coping with loss, please visit amcny.org/socialwork or contact AMC's social worker, Jamie Cohen

Jamie Cohen, LCSW
212-329-8521
socialwork@amcny.org

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If you have a question about pet health, we have the answer.

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