

# CHILDREN AND PET LOSS

TIPS TO DISCUSS THE LOSS OF A PET WITH YOUR CHILDREN  
AND HELP THEM COPE WITH THEIR GRIEF



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**LOSING A PET** can be a significant challenge for children and is often their first encounter with death. They may rely on their pet as a source of comfort and companionship when they are feeling sick, upset, sad, or lonely. This is why it is important to discuss the situation with your children and to give them the chance to say goodbye.

Here is some insight on how you can support your children as they work through their grief.

### **BREAKING THE NEWS**

Tell your child as soon as possible. Delaying this information may lead to feelings of betrayal and resentment. If possible, deliver the news in person in a comfortable and safe place. You do not need to avoid the words 'death' or 'dying'. However, limit the details you share with younger children.



### **ALWAYS BE HONEST AND PATIENT**

Children may have trouble understanding deaths' permanence and walk around asking where their pet is. Although it might be tempting to tell them that their pet was "put to sleep" or that it "ran away and might never come back", these explanations could create anxiety as children may think that the same thing could happen to other loved ones. No matter how well-meaning, lying to your child won't alleviate the sadness they feel and may even cause them to be angry and resentful that you did.



### **BE PREPARED**

Be ready to answer questions about what happens to a pet after it dies in an optimistic way. Your reply will depend on your understanding of death, your beliefs, and your child's age. For very old pets or those battling a terminal illness, consider talking to your child before the death occurs.

## SHARE YOUR GRIEF

Young children look to their parents as a model for their behaviour. Sharing your grief lets them know that it is alright to feel sad or mad and creates a precious moment of intimacy between both of you. Children will find comfort knowing that they are not alone and that it is normal for them to express their feelings or cry when they are sad and lonely. You can even share stories about pets that you lost as a child and how difficult it was to say goodbye. Make sure to talk to your child, and give them space to express and share their feelings with you.



## EUTHANIZED PETS

If euthanizing your pet is the most compassionate option, you can say things like “Jack would never have gotten better on his own”, “This is the kindest way to prevent Bella from suffering”, or “Lucy will pass peacefully.” Reassure your child that your pet will not feel scared or be in pain.

## SUDDEN DEATH OF A PET

If the loss of a pet is unexpected or is the outcome of an unfortunate accident, calmly explain to your child what has happened. Let their questions guide how much information you share with them. For example, you could say, “Buster died this morning and he’s not coming back. I’m very sad about it and it’s okay for you to feel sad too.”

## HELPING A CHILD COPE

Some children may feel guilty about times they were unkind or did not take good care of their pet. They may also feel angry that their pet could not get better. Here are some things you can do or say to help them work through their emotions:



- **Be there, be patient, carefully listen when they share their feelings**, and comfort them with lots of hugs and cuddles. They will remember your compassion and understanding.
- **Reassure them that they will not always feel this way**. Let them know that it is alright if they do not want to talk about it now and that you will always be there when they are ready to share.

- **Use age-appropriate resources**, such as books and videos that discuss the topic of death in a language your child will understand. Children can also express their feelings through colouring, drawing, or doing crafts to honour their beloved pet. Some colouring pages are included herein on pages 6 to 9. Click [here](#) to visit the **Euthabag®** website to find book suggestions on pet loss for children and adults.
- **Maintain your child's normal routine.** Although you might be tempted to allow your child to skip a few music lessons or miss a play date because they feel sad, it could be harmful in the long run if your child becomes used to withdrawing themselves from friends and activities they enjoy when they feel sad.
- **Keep a close eye on your child** and watch for signs that they may be struggling with grief, including being sad for weeks, having trouble sleeping, not participating in activities they once enjoyed, or having difficulties in school. A few sessions with a counsellor or child therapist could be the best option for a child who is struggling to reconcile their loss.
- **Honour the pet.** Many children feel better about the loss of a pet if they can participate in some kind of farewell ceremony or memorial service for the animal. They might also like to keep a memorial item or create a scrapbook with memories of their beloved pet. You could even suggest to volunteer at an animal shelter or make a donation as a positive and constructive way to honour their pet by giving back to animals in need.
- **Involve your child.** You can have them write a letter or prepare a drawing to be sent off with their pet. They can also draw on the designated body bag.



Whatever you decide, it is important to allow your child to remember their pet in a way that means the most to them. This gives them a chance to work through their loss in a positive and meaningful way. Speaking often about your pet with love is perhaps one of the best ways for your child to keep the memory alive. Share stories about your pet's funny moments and have your child tell you about their favourite memories.

**Finally, reassure your child that while the pain of losing a pet will eventually fade away, their happy memories will always remain.**





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