



Explaining a pet's death to children

Explaining the death of a pet to a child is never easy.

An adult's first thought might be to try to shield the child from the truth to make it easier for them. How adults handle such an event can have a far reaching effect on our children's overall understanding of death and dying.

Pets are a part of the family and that means, for most children, they are a big part of their daily routine. They might have the jobs of walking, feeding or grooming them, or maybe they are just playmates or be like their best friend who greets them when they wake up and when they come home from school. So, dealing with their death won't be easy.

HERE ARE SOME DO'S AND DON'TS TO GUIDE ADULTS:

DO tell the truth – it can be tempting to make up a story: “*She’s gone away for a holiday*” or “*He ran away*”. But children have a way of finding out the truth so it's best for you to start there. To actually say words like ‘dead and ‘death’ makes the event real, rather than leaving the child thinking there's a chance their pet will still come home. It's unnecessary to give every detail but to say their pet died because of an accident, an illness or old age is a realistic starting point.

DO explain euthanasia – if your pet was old or seriously ill and this was the best option, you can tell your children that the vet did all he/she could before making that decision. It is important for children to know that euthanasia is a gentle death – their pet died peacefully, there was no pain and it was the kindest thing to do as they were never going to get better.

DON'T underestimate their wish to say goodbye – many children want to be involved in burying their pet or their cremated remains. Depending on the circumstances, you can ask them if they want to decorate a container or choose a blanket for this. You can explain that it's normal to have a ritual to say goodbye – they can even write a poem or put a special photo or small toy with their pet.

DO expect emotions and allow them to be heard – there might be angry outbursts, tears, and words of protest – *It's not fair! Why did that happen, he was only a puppy? I don't like it!* Children might be out of sorts and not feel like eating their meals or playing. You can show your understand by giving them a hug and letting them know it's alright to be sad.

DON'T think you have to hide your own emotions – showing how you feel and talking about what's happened displays a positive example to children. It tells them it's OK to show your grief when something awful happens in your life. It also helps them to know they are not alone or being ‘babyish’ for feeling like this. These are important lessons for children to learn.

DO encourage children to keep mementos – they might like a lock of fur, they might want to keep a lead or favourite toy. Getting rid of their pet's possessions won't make the hurt go away. They might like to make a scrap book or write a story about their pet – these are all good ways of saying this pet mattered to your family.

This factsheet is written by **Doris Zagdanski**, a leading figure in modern day grief and empathy education. She is the author of ‘When Pets Die – It's alright to grieve’ and the Convenor of www.mygriefassist.com.au, a contemporary website offering information and resources to foster an understanding of loss and grief in the community.