



# Veterinary Wisdom<sup>®</sup>

## Helping Kids With Pet Loss

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A pet's death is often your child's first experience with loss and feelings of grief. The experience of pet loss presents an opportunity for you to teach your children to express grief in an emotionally healthy way, free of shame or embarrassment. You and your veterinarian can be valuable resources for your children when you follow a few key guidelines:

- **Be honest**

Like most parents, you want to protect your children from any kind of emotional pain. Yet, attempting to "soften the blow" by telling them that a pet 'ran away' or 'went to live with someone else' only creates a different kind of pain. Losing a pet under any circumstances will cause your child to grieve. And thinking that their pet ran away may add feelings of abandonment and rejection.

Find ways to be truthful with your children. Explain your pet's dying process and/or death with simple, accurate words that they can understand. Avoid euphemisms like "put to sleep." You put your children to sleep every night at bedtime, so an explanation like this only causes confusion and anxiety.

- **Involve your children in the euthanasia process**

Children who are well prepared can usually handle the intense emotions and medical procedures that are part of euthanasia. And research, along with clinical experience, show that it is often beneficial for children to be able to say a personal good-bye to a loved one who has died.

But, you should always give your children choices about how and when to be involved. Older children may choose to be with a pet when the euthanasia is performed, while younger children may choose to say good-bye while their pet is still alive. Other children may choose to view a pet's body after death has occurred, reassuring themselves that their beloved pet has really died.

Very young children don't really understand death and have short attention spans. If your young child wants to be included, it's a good idea to ask a friend to be with your family when your pet dies, so he or she can take care of your young child. This allows you and your older children uninterrupted time to say your own good-byes.

- **Allow time for grief**

As a caring parent, it may be tempting for you to try to "cheer up" your grieving child by immediately adopting a new pet. And sometimes this works. Many children are able to bond with a new pet and grieve for the one who died at the same time.

Yet, while there's no "right" time to adopt a new pet, be sure your children don't get the message that a family member who dies is easily replaceable. Grieving is normal, natural, and healing. And grieving is a way to honor the impact of a pet's life on your own.

While adopting a new pet may help your whole family feel better, grieving together can also bring you closer together. Then, when everyone feels ready, a new pet can join you and find his or her own joyful place in your family.



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