

Children and pet bereavement

Children form strong bonds of attachment to their pets. They are best friends and confidants and are seen as an important part of the family. The relationship that a child forms with a pet, will often determine how they relate to animals in the future and how they will care for a pet. Children will witness and internalize how adults in the home relate to animal members and this also will influence their adult behaviour. Psychiatric and criminology studies have shown that adults who commit sadistic acts upon another human, frequently have abused or seen animals abused as children. Therefore adults should aim to be a good role model in guiding their children's relationship with pets during their life and death. Moreover, how parents (or those in the role of parents) explain to their child that a pet is dying or has died can have an important effect both in the immediate and distant future. It can be very difficult for a parent coping with one's own personal grief whilst trying to support a child too. Children too, are often worried and upset at seeing their parent's grief. They may try and hide their feelings for fear of upsetting their parents even further.

The death of a pet is likely to be one of the first experiences of loss and death that a child encounters. How a parent explains this is crucial. Lying may make the child distrust the parent at a later stage when the truth becomes clear. The child may remember this into adulthood. Parents should aim to explain the death or impending death honestly, with simple language that can be understood and be as straightforward as possible. There is no benefit in adding to the burden of grief by imparting graphic, unpleasant, technical details that will disturb and frighten the child. But there should be no doubt in the message that the pet will/has died as this will further add distress and confusion. Sharing thoughts and talking should be encouraged. Problems can arise when not all family members share the same feelings for the pet. For example, a young child whose beloved goldfish has died is ridiculed by an older sibling because they are upset. This results in unnecessary extra distress for the young child. Parents themselves need to be aware of their own potential failure to recognise attachment and love for a pet and not be dismissive of their child's grief.

The parent's religious belief system may influence what information is conveyed to the child. It may be better to keep the information as factual and simple as possible without complicating the situation by introducing religious doctrine. For example – saying that the rabbit was 'so good that the angels took her to heaven'. This may make a young child fear that if they are good, they will be taken away from home too.

Careful consideration must be given to adapting the conversation to a level that is relative to a child's age and ability to understand. Also, how much involvement in any decision making that the child will have and whether the child will be present at the death.

As a rough guide very young children will have little understanding of the concept of death and dying. They may be told that the pet has died and will not be coming back. Children may respond by crying, becoming clingy, deteriorating in speech and have altered sleep patterns. They can be comforted by hugging, rocking and soothing noises.

Children of primary school age have a greater awareness of life and death. Again, gentle confirmation that the pet has died and will not be coming back is necessary. If possible, try to avoid saying 'put to sleep' or 'going to sleep' as at this stage, some younger children may believe that the pet will wake up. Also, they may fear going to sleep. Children can exhibit the same behaviour as above plus bedwetting, nightmares, temper tantrums, withdrawal and psychosomatic symptoms such as stomach upsets. Reassure the child by answering all questions honestly and simply. Support the child by reiterating that you are not going away and that you are there for them.

At junior school stage, the parent's role at this stage may involve answering more complex questions. And some parents may feel totally inadequate at providing an answer. Sometimes it feels that there are no real answers. A child's grief may be more developed than a younger child's. Children will normally know that death means that they will never see their pet again. They may ask why the animal is so poorly; why doesn't the medicine work; why can't the vet save it; why can't the parent save it; why can't I save it; it's too young to die; it's not fair. Parents should again try to answer each question honestly and perhaps admit that sometimes life does seem very unfair. Making teachers aware that the child has suffered a bereavement is useful as it may explain any potential disturbances in behaviour. Trying to engage the child in extra school activities may act as a distraction tool. Acknowledge the child's feelings by asking how they are; tell them that you are sorry for their loss; that you know that they are going through a difficult time. Never tell a child to stop crying or that a replacement animal can be obtained. Or the classic 'it's just a pet'. As adult animal lovers, we know how hurtful that expression can be.

Secondary school age. Loss can be compounded by perhaps having shared life together. The child may have grown up with the pet. They do not know what life is like without it. Grief and the simultaneous transformation from child to teenager and early adulthood is daunting. Young people do not always feel that they wish to discuss their feelings with their parents. They can be encouraged to write down their thoughts and feelings in a diary or use the internet to research the subject and perhaps blog with other young people in a similar position.

It is difficult enough explaining that a pet was old and has died in its sleep; was so ill that only euthanasia could alleviate suffering or was hit by a car. But when the parent or child

was responsible for the death of the animal, however accidental and unintentional, shame, guilt and blame can be added to the mixture of emotions. Parents should try not to apportion blame; gently affirm that the person responsible did not want the pet to come to any harm and try to learn any lessons from the experience.

Children can, just as adults, go through stages of grief such as denial, anger, bargaining and depression. Some children may require specialized help if depression becomes acute or chronic; if self-harm or suicidal inclinations are suspected; substance abuse develops or the ability to carry out day to day activities is impaired. Extra care should be given when the loss of a pet corresponds to another loss, for example loss of a parent through divorce or separation, as the child may lose almost an entire family network.

Try to resist offering to get a new pet immediately after death. This can send out the message that the sadness the child feels will vanish if a 'replacement' pet is adopted. It won't and the child may feel disloyal to their friend.

After the pet's death, the simple ceremony of arranging a funeral can help the child accept the loss. Writing a poem, drawing a picture, organising favourite photos, placing flowers on the pet's grave acknowledges the pet's important place in family life and especially the child's heart.

Animal bereavement support factsheets are a free resource to help bereaved animal lovers. They must not be interpreted as providing professional counselling or medical advice and no liability or responsibility can be accepted as such. Please consult your G.P for qualified assistance. Thank you.

Copyright © Inga Voit 2013