

Children in Grief

Understanding Their Journey

By Coleen Ellis, Founder, Two Hearts Pet Loss Center

What's My Role

As a companion assisting a child, it will be important to allow the child to "lead" the journey through the grief process. Children are natural mourners and will, in all actuality, teach us what they will need to mourn.

Children will mourn in doses and will have sadness spurts. They will mourn, then play, mourn some more, then play again. While this may seem like they are being disrespectful to other's feelings of sadness, it is a very healthy way for youngsters to move themselves through to grief reconciliation.

Your role as an adult caregiver is to allow the child the space to grieve in his own way. A child will not grieve in the same way as an adult and should not be expected to. Your most important role is to model your grieving behavior in a way that children will feel safe and comfortable to express their feelings. Adults are a barometer as to how children will grieve and will follow the lead they are given.

How to Help

Saying good-bye to a pet friend for a child will be hard. They will first want to be given a chance to remember their pet and to relive the life they shared. This process will be an integral part for them to move themselves through the grief journey to saying good-bye. As you assist a child through these emotions, the child will guide you in what help they need. They will let you know when they are ready to talk, cry, or show other emotions. Forcing a child into talking about these feelings, or forcing a prescribed set of steps onto a child, will create some resistance.

As a model of healthy grieving, you as the companionship adult will allow the child to physically SEE a healthy way of grieving; therefore, creating the environment that they will need in mourning as well. In this process of reliving the life was shared, these are some you can do to assist the child:

- Allow the child to see you cry and be sad. While many people think not allowing a child to see this is showing a sign of strength, it is actually showing a sign of weakness in not being able to show emotions. A child will WANT to see these emotions.
- Set up a table in your home to display items symbolic of your pet. The "Tribute Table" will provide an active place for your child to place items special to the deceased pet and to the life shared with the family. Guide the child with items such as toys, treats, photos, and personalized artwork for the tribute table.
- At a designated period following the death of the pet, assist the child in arranging a memorial service to pay tribute to the pet. Let the child assist you in deciding on the readings, poems, letters, or music to play at the service.
- Create a personalized marker to place in the yard, complete with the child's nickname for the pet.
- Assist the child in creating a journal, scrapbook, or photo album.
- Allow the child to participate in the final arrangements of the pet's body.
- As a family, organize a donation drive for a local pet shelter in memory of your pet.

Things to Remember

In talking to a child about the death of their beloved pet, it is important to use the correct terminology to describe what has happened. The use of the words "death," "dead," and "die" will not confuse the child to the actuality of the event. Use of the words "sleeping," "gone to the farm," and "adopted by another family" will only create confusion and unresolved grief feelings for a child.

While it is hard to watch a child who is sad, a natural instinct may be to take the pain away by getting another pet. Allow the child ample time to grieve this loss, imparting death is very much a part of life. Use this time as a teachable moment about life, love, death, and grief.

"Healthy children will not fear life if their elders have integrity enough not to fear death." — Dr. Erik Erikson