



## **COPING WITH PET BEREAVEMENT IN CHILDREN**

This Support Sheet is to offer ideas on how to support children facing a pet bereavement.

If a pet is coming to the end of its life or has already died, one of the difficulties a parent or carer may face is how to talk about the cycle of life and death to the children. It is best to keep things as simple and clear as possible when talking about death and dying – to use the words ‘dying’ or ‘died’ rather than trying to describe death in other ways that might cause confusion. ‘Euthanasia’ is mostly referred to as being ‘put to sleep’ but this can cause some young children to feel anxious about going to sleep themselves. Children may ask all kinds of questions, such as ‘Why does my pet have to die?’ which, of course, is difficult to answer; however, natural analogy can be helpful. The EASE children’s pet bereavement activity book ‘Remember my Pet’ offers an idea of how to use natural analogy:

*"We all live on a planet called Earth, and there are lots of planets and stars that you can see when you look up at the night sky. Earth is a beautiful big blue ball that whizzes around the Sun. Look around and you can see that there are lots of things living here – flowers, trees, birds, animals, fish, people and insects.*

*Many different things appear, grow and live – some like elephants and whales for many years, and some like flowers, tiny insects and butterflies, only for a short time. When they come to the end of their life, they die. You can see this happen with plants and flowers in a garden or park – they go back to the earth. Have you seen the dandelions as they die back? They leave lots of seeds that float through the air so that more flowers can grow another season.*

*Why do things die? If nothing ever died on Planet Earth it would keep filling up and filling up, and then there would be no more space left for new lives to appear. Pets die too. Of course, it is very sad when much loved pets die because we miss them. But while they were alive you cared for them with kindness and gave them lots of love, which helped them to be happy."*

Whilst you don’t need to give your child upsetting details about a pet’s illness or the nature of their death, being honest and straightforward is considered to be the best way forward. Telling the truth engenders trust and avoids unnecessary difficulties and misunderstandings later on. It is obviously very difficult to tell a child that their much-loved pet will soon die, but it can help to explain that you don’t want the pet to suffer. Similarly, if the pet has already died, it can be a comfort to know that it wasn’t allowed to be in pain for any length of time.

You may feel that the children, especially teenagers, should be involved in the important decision about the need for euthanasia and the timing of it, but this obviously depends on their age and how you think they would cope. Alternatively, it may work better to make the decision and to then gently explain to the children what is going to happen, when and why.

Of course, saying 'goodbye' is difficult for the whole family. If possible, it is important to offer each child a little private time to say their goodbye and to tell the pet how much they loved him or her. If the pet has died unexpectedly, and you are worried about the children seeing any injuries or wounds, you can carefully cover the body, leaving a part that's intact for them to see and touch if they wish.

Ceremonies and memorials are a good way for the family to gather together to say a final goodbye to a much-loved pet, whether it is being buried in the garden or otherwise. Children often naturally want to create a special place in the garden in memory of the pet, arranging stones and special things to mark the grave or memorial site. Some children like to put together a memory box of special items that remind them of their pet, or to write poems or letters to the deceased pet – all of which will help them to grieve. For children up to around ten years of age, you can download the EASE activity book, 'Remembering my Pet', designed to help children to express how they feel and how they wish to remember their pet.

Children do not necessarily show their grief in the same way as adults, and sometimes they only start to grieve some weeks after the loss, in which case you may not automatically link how they are at that point to the pet bereavement. Besides crying or possibly becoming withdrawn, they may suffer nightmares, have stomach aches or headaches, or be off their food. There may be problems at school, such as behaving differently in class, or their standard of work dropping. Sometimes it is worth mentioning to the class teacher what has happened so that they can be aware. One thing that can help is to let the children know that you recognise what a special relationship they had with the pet, and how they contributed to helping to make their life a happy one.

Whilst you may feel that you don't want to show that you yourself are upset in front of the children, grieving as a family usually encourages an openness and freedom to express what you're all going through together. After all, if the pet was considered a much-loved member of the family, the sense of loss will be significant and each of you will need to work through the grief. It is always good to have support and to be able to talk, not only about how you feel but also to remember your pet's many special qualities and the happy times you all shared.



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