

**NEWCOMERS GUIDE:  
ANIMAL DEATH AND THE CHILD  
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As we breed and sell kittens, we meet wonderful people and develop long term relationships. And THEN...a tragedy...someone's kitten or cat dies. We get THE call that can make us wonder why we ever got into breeding. The Nightmare scenario goes something like this: you pick up the phone and a distraught adult begins telling you their beloved animal has died. This is hard to deal with as you now are experiencing the grief of the situation also! When this distraught adult is also telling you their child is devastated...that's even harder. How do you explain to a child their most favorite creature in the world has died?

When told the truth, children have a remarkable way of dealing with the facts and situations. Children are better off emotionally when told the facts about the loss of the pet. Parents can adjust the amount of detail based on what they feel the child is able to understand. Children have very vivid imaginations and might well conjure up more trauma than the pet actually had. The truth and resulting emotional impact is preferable to the anxiety their imaginations might create. The child, depending on the age, may react to the situation of pet loss in a variety of ways. If there are multiple children (or adults) grieving the same pet, each person will grieve in a different way. The amount and depth of grief may well be based on the amount of loss and grief the person has had in their life. The lost pet may well become a focus of grieving for other losses that are not seen as being "mournable" or were never mourned. For example, a seven year old girl has recently moved and lost her favorite teacher and a long-time friend. If this same child loses a pet she may well exhibit more grief in both volume and intensity than another seven year old girl that has not been recently relocated or had a good friend leave.

Crying and being angry are to be allowed. Grief is a psychological necessity, not self-indulgence. (3:41) Grief is a real and an inevitable part of life. While we would all wish not to have these things happen it's probably best as adults to have a plan in place when there is a loss.

(Note: Children under 9 do not generally see death as final. Children will experience these manifestations as they are able to based on their age.)

As adults, we sometimes have difficulty facing death ourselves so an honest open discussion with a child may be even more difficult. How adults respond when something or someone loved dies has a major effect on how children react to death. You may think by avoiding the subject you are somehow sparing the child. The reality is that the child will grieve anyway! When the subject is ignored the child may suffer more from feeling isolated than from the actual death itself. (5:17)

Learning about grief and loss can be an important experience for the child. Grieving adds an important dimension to a child's ability to care about other people and animals. Anyone old enough to love is old enough to grieve. Even before a child can talk, they (the children) grieve when someone or something they loved dies. (5:17) Grief allows the child and family to share feelings and belief systems. At these times, there's the opportunity to explain to the child our thoughts about death, and religious convictions about death and its meaning. We can also teach about the concept of memories that keep that pet alive in our minds and hearts.

The loss of a pet should be taken as seriously as the loss of a person. (1:331) A child's sense of death is more primitive (underdeveloped) than that of the adult and a child will equate death with being left alone or deserted. Knowing this, parents need to spend time with the child and openly deal with the issue.

At the time of loss, most children have a limited experience of life and they tend to personalize all events. When a pet dies they need to know (A) the animal's death was not their responsibility and (B) the death did not result from the child's bad behavior, thoughts or wishes. A parent needs to adjust the information about death to the age and needs of the child. Tell the child as much as you think can be understood. Talk to them frequently and support them through their tears and fears. Children under 3 believe everything is possible and may expect their parents to be able to bring the animal back. To preschoolers, death is still reversible and nothing

is final. Children under 5 cannot grasp the permanence of death. Many children in this age group will try and use fantasy to make the pet return. Expect the child to imagine and talk about the pet in familiar places and situations. School age children younger than 9 usually understand that death is a biologic event but only at about age 9 can a child grasp death as final and irreversible. (4:1318)

There are some things you can do to help console the child:

(A) Maintain the daily routine of the child as much as possible. If you took a walk with the family dog then still take that walk. This serves as a structured time for the child to process feelings with support from the parent. If the kitten went to bed with the child, use a stuffed kitten or read a story about a kitten or cat and encourage the child to talk about the animal and process feelings. If the child fed the kitten every morning, talk with the child and replace that task with another task that will help the child feel important and needed, i.e. watering a special plant. Encourage the child to remember the pet in bed-time prayers. If the child starts talking about the pet, stop what you are doing and listen. This early incident may well be remembered as a baseline of support the child will remember as losses happen in the future.

(B) Offer frequent, calm explanations of the event keeping in mind the child's level of understanding and the child's possible feelings of guilt. Keep the information simple and true. Guilt surrounding death happens with children older than three so be particularly sensitive to this issue with children past their third birthday.

(C) Get help from friends or other loved ones. Perhaps the minister, priest or rabbi can speak with the child if you feel it's needed to deal with the larger concepts of death.

(D) Sometimes parents seek outside sources to help teach their children about life issues. There have been many well written books on the subject of death particularly focused on the child. One excellent book dealing with death for children is "The Fall of Freddie the Leaf" by Leo Buscaglia. This might be a book all of us want in our library!

(E) Be open to discussion about the death in the future. While children seem to recover from grief faster than adults might, that is no indication that the grief process is complete. The more the child understands what happened, the easier it will be for the child to make peace with the loss. Allow whatever length of time is needed by **each** family member to process the loss.

A parent needs to encourage the child to talk about the animal and express feelings of grief and even **anger** at the loss. It is important for the child to realize and experience the loss and also to experience the sense of caring that goes with the loss of a pet.

Allow the child a period of mourning time before a new pet is introduced. This time period may be weeks or months depending on the child. A short ceremony of some type may be very helpful...a funeral, so to speak, for the animal. Perhaps the child would like to plant a tree in memory of the pet...something living to promote the sense that life does go on and objects in our environment serve as memory triggers.

As parents, we do not want our children to think pets are expendable or easily replaceable. Children can misinterpret easily and can equate the pet being expendable to the child also being replaceable. It's the overall concept of death we are dealing with and a child may have more fear regarding death if the child senses that things are easily replaceable. As adults we realize this is ridiculous but children process differently than adults and we must be certain to support the child self-esteem at these times of trauma and loss. We can use this opportunity to instill the sanctity of life.

### **Some clichés to be avoided...**

As we deal with children about death we must be truthful. Children are very literal and to avoid truth may plant seeds of confusion and distrust. Sister Teresa M. McIntier, RN, MS has done much research and work with children and death and offers the following suggestions on how to speak with a child about death.

Situation: the child's animal died last night and they are just being told.

INAPPROPRIATE: "Smokey" went to sleep last night and is now in Heaven.

CHILD'S RESPONSE: Fear of sleep. Fear of the dark. Nightmares

APPROPRIATE: "Smokey" died last night. This will be a sad time for all of us but we will get through it together.

INAPPROPRIATE: God loved "Smokey" so much that He took him to Heaven to live with the angels.

CHILD'S RESPONSE: Fear of God. Fear Mother will also die. Fear of love. Possible rejection of spiritual values.

APPROPRIATE: We believe "Smokey" is in Heaven with God and that God knows how very much we miss "Smokey"

These circumstances will later help a child deal with the loss of people loved. One situation Sr. McIntier uses is more relevant to people loss than animal loss but I thought I would include it here. Situation: a loved person has died.

INAPPROPRIATE: Grandma (as an example) went on a long trip and won't be coming back.

CHILD'S RESPONSE: Why didn't that special person say good bye before she left. Doesn't that person love me anymore? Is that why that person left without saying good-bye-bye? Where did she go? Fear of loss and abandonment that may become an issue when Mom and Dad head off to work.

APPROPRIATE: Grandma was very sick and the sickness made her die. We believe that because she was such a good grandma God said she could come and be with Him in Heaven. (Please note: these responses are geared toward a specific belief system and can be adjusted based on religious and spiritual beliefs)

Sr. McIntier has also developed some ways to help a child develop some positive rituals for healing after a death. Ritual need not be elaborate or detailed to be beneficial. One I particularly liked was giving the child a bell engraved with the name of the pet. The bell is rung by any member of the family when they are feeling sad. The child can be told the sound of the bell carries their love to the pet in Heaven.

### **When is Outside Help Needed?**

Most of the time children process grief and move on with life. For some children this will not be the case and outside intervention may be needed.

Outside intervention may be considered if:

- \* a child pretends absolutely nothing happened
- \* school work declines
- \* the death was kept from the child for a long period of time or lies were told about the death
- \* a child threatens suicide
- \* a child panics frequently
- \* a child frequently physically assaults others or is cruel to animals
- \* a child begins new very negative behaviors with the family or outside the family
- \* a child is unwilling or unable to be social with other children

"When parents can convey their grief, their own questions about mortality, memory, and the meaning of suffering, the child then has an opportunity to experience, in safety, the kinds of questions that plague us all". (1:330) Life is followed by death. There is a natural progression in all things. Children, regardless of age, know and recognize change/loss and the emotion that change and loss creates. Perhaps with a bit more knowledge we can help our children through some of the endless questions we all face at moments in our lives.

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