

Supporting children and teens

After the death of a pet or companion animal



This resource is a collaboration with DoveLewis's Pet Loss Support Program, which started in 1986 as a community initiative to support animal lovers and veterinary professionals. We spoke with Debrah Lee, LCSW, Veterinary Well-Being Program Director, who facilitates peer support groups and provides short term grief support for families after the death of a companion animal. For many children and teens, the death of a pet is their first experience with loss and grief. This resource is meant to provide the information and language adults need to support children and teens before and after the death of a companion animal. We are grateful to DoveLewis and Debrah for sharing these insights and suggestions.

Dougy Center: What is unique about the death of a pet in a family?

DoveLewis: Whether furry, scaled, or feathered, companion animals are cherished family members. Children form strong bonds with their beloved companions – they are their siblings, playmates, dear friends, confidantes, and endless sources of comfort, love, and support. The death of a companion animal may be the first time a child experiences a major loss in their life. Depending on the age of the child, this may leave parents or caregivers with the challenge of having to explain death.

Each child or teen has a special and unique connection with their companion animal. Depending on their age and developmental level, they will respond differently when that companion animal dies. Though children may express grief differently than adults, they too experience it deeply.

Dougy Center: How do you suggest adults talk with children and teens about an animal's illness/death?

DoveLewis: It's natural to want to protect your children and spare them from pain, but this experience with

death, loss, and grief can help shape how your child will think about and respond to other losses in the future. Remember that children absorb information from many sources, and being open and honest in your communication gives you the best opportunity to help them understand what is happening and what to expect.

You can allow children and teens to be part of the process by staying open and encouraging questions. Be mindful that too much information, especially all at once, may be overwhelming or lead to confusion. Follow your child's lead and offer honest, simple, and direct responses to their questions.

Talking openly to children about their companion animal's illness can help them prepare and provide opportunities to say good-bye – perhaps through a letter, a drawing, or by creating more loving memories. Using age-appropriate books can help children begin to process their companion's illness and death as well.

Often, a companion animal's death is sudden and unexpected. If this is true for your family, being honest about what happened, using books, and

finding ways to still say goodbye can be ways to help children and teens begin to process the loss.

Helpful ways to explain death to children:

“Many animals don’t live as long as people do.”

“They’re very sick and not going to get better, even with medicine.” *If your animal has a specific illness, it helps to name that for children.*

“Ralph is very sick with an illness called cancer.”

“Dead means they don’t breathe or move. They don’t need to eat or sleep, and they won’t return.”

Helpful ways to explain euthanasia to children:

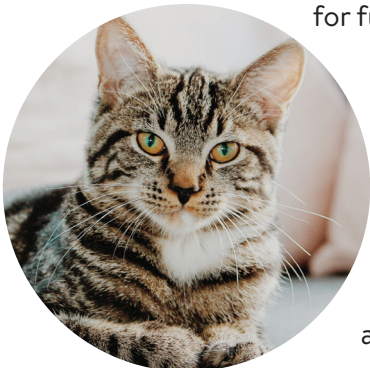
“When our pet can’t get better and is suffering, we need to help end their suffering.”

“The doctor will give (name of pet) a medicine just for animals that will let them die in a peaceful and painless way.”

Dougy Center: How can adults explain euthanasia?

DoveLewis: The level of detail you share to explain euthanasia will depend on the age of the child, but it’s always important to be honest. Euthanasia is a loving decision that we make to help a companion animal die.

When talking about a companion’s death avoid euphemisms like “put to sleep,” “passed,” “lost,” and “put down,” as these phrases can cause more confusion and fear, especially for younger children. Do not lie about where the companion is by saying they “ran away” or “went to live somewhere else.” Children may feel abandoned and wonder if they did something to cause their companion to leave them in this way. Do not blame the veterinarian as this may make children reluctant to seek care for future companion animals.



In addition to euthanasia, children may have questions about what will happen after, such as the decision to bury or cremate a companion animal. Provide responses

that are clear, honest, and direct. It’s important to remind your children that their companion’s body is no longer alive, and they do not feel pain.

Dougy Center: What kinds of questions can parents and caregivers anticipate?

DoveLewis: Here are some examples of questions children may ask:

“Where will they go when they die?”

“Why did they die?”

“Where are they now?”

“Will I see them again?”

“What happened to their body?”

“Was there anything else we could have done?”

Children may also have questions about the life and death of other people and animals in their lives.

Rather than waiting for your child to ask questions, you can also ask what questions they have. This shows that you are open to speaking with them about their grief and loss.

Depending on your child’s age, they may ask the same question multiple times. Be prepared for repetition, especially from the youngest children who might not yet understand that death is permanent. Children may wonder if their pet died because of something they did or didn’t do. You can reassure your child that nothing we say, think, or wish can cause an animal to die — encourage them to talk about their worries and how they are feeling.

Dougy Center: What kinds of end-of-life rituals can families do for their animals?

DoveLewis: Children’s participation in end-of-life rituals will vary based on their age and developmental level. If the opportunity presents itself, consider what final memories you want to create. Is there something you cherished doing with your animal that you would want to do again? Is there something that you always meant to do with your beloved companion that you can do now? Some children may want to prepare a special drawing, letter, or other goodbye item for their animal companion. When it comes to being present during euthanasia, it’s best to give children and teens the choice. You can tell them what to expect and then let them decide.

The rituals you choose after your pet dies may depend on whether their body will be buried or cremated. Some families may hold a funeral or celebration of life for their loved one, or they may invite others to share memories.

Dougy Center: How can adults support children and teens after an animal dies?

DoveLewis: Being open and honest with children and teens is the best first step in supporting them and includes talking about your feelings and how you are grieving. Children will model your behavior, so sharing with them what you are feeling creates space for them to also express their emotions. Children need to know that it’s normal to feel sad and to cry – and that it’s also normal to feel angry, guilty, or any other emotion. Remember to take care of yourself as it can be challenging to support your child when you are also grieving.

In addition to normalizing and validating their range of emotions and other reactions,



offering options for expression can be helpful. Grief affects our emotions, but it also can impact our bodies, minds, behaviors, and how we interact with others. Offering children and teens a variety of opportunities for expression can be helpful. These can include physical activity, rest, play, writing, drawing, music, being with friends, and receiving comfort and reassurance.

Dougy Center: Can you share examples of memorial art activities families can do?

DoveLewis: Tangible activities like drawing or sculpting can help children express their grief. These might include drawing a favorite memory or making something with Play Doh that reminds them of their animal. Another activity is to make a collage of images and colors that remind your child of their beloved companion.

For some children and teens, writing can be a way to express their feelings and help them maintain a connection with their animal. Prompts could include: my favorite things about them, what I miss, how I remember, things I learned from them, my favorite memory, and silly things they used to do.

Having a physical reminder of a companion to carry – a linking object – may also help children and teens feel connected to their companion. This can include making a bracelet or necklace with their companion’s name or photo, or it could be painting a small rock or decorating a small picture to carry with them.

Dougy Center: We often encourage adults to reassure children that they aren’t responsible for someone’s death, but sometimes a pet died because of something a child or teen did or didn’t do. What suggestions do you have for adults facing this tough situation?

DoveLewis: Regret and guilt are painful parts of the grief experience. We may feel guilty for the things that we did or regret for the things that we didn’t do but wish we had. Expressions of regret and guilt may be more intense when the death of a beloved

companion is related to something that your child did or didn't do.

It is hard to watch your child in pain, but their feelings deserve to be seen and heard. Feeling guilty and being guilty are two different things. You can also share that accidents happen, they are a part of life, and it's often our mistakes that help us grow. Reassure your child that they loved their companion, and they did not mean for this to happen. Let your child know that you love them no matter what. Grief is not something that can be fixed. Allow your child to express their feelings openly. To support your child, it's important to attend to your own feelings of guilt, regret, or blame as well.

Dougy Center: For families who are considering welcoming a new companion animal, how can adults talk about it with their children?

DoveLewis: The question of when to welcome another companion animal is unique to each family. Include all family members in the conversation and ensure that everyone understands that a new companion is not a replacement. Each beloved companion is unique, special, and deserving of our love and grief. We can't replace the relationship, but

we can remember, grieve, and honor our animals who have died while growing and building new relationships when we are ready. You can invite your children to consider what it might be like to have another companion animal in their lives. Welcoming a new companion into the family may offer the opportunity for children to learn that losing a loved one is painful, and they can also heal, grow, love, and experience joy again.



For more suggestions on supporting your child or teen with the death of a companion animal, please contact DoveLewis at petloss@dovelewis.org or visit www.dovelewis.org/pet-owners/pet-loss-support.

For support and resources for children and teens who are grieving before and after the death of a parent, sibling, primary caregiver, friend, or other relative please contact Dougy Center at dougy.org or help@dougy.org.



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DoveLewis Veterinary Emergency & Specialty Hospital, established in 1973 and based in Portland, Oregon, is the only nonprofit, 24-hour emergency and intensive care unit in the region. With 50 years of service to the community, DoveLewis has treated more than 750,000 animals.

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The mission of Dougy Center is to provide grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. We provide support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children who are grieving.

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