

7 WAYS TO HELP YOUR CHILD COPE WITH THE

LOSS OF A PET





For animal lovers of every age, losing a pet can be a significant loss. It can be especially challenging for children, as the loss of a family pet is often their first encounter with death. With a bit of care and consideration, you can make this sad time easier for your child by guiding and supporting them through the grieving process every step of the way.

Pets are more than just the animals we own. Many of us consider them as fully-fledged members of the family. For kids, a family pet often takes up the role of best friend, loyal companion and trusty side-kick. They're the mainstay in the household, whether it's the wagging tail that welcomes the family as soon the front door opens or the gentle nudging of a furry critter that wants to play, pets are a constant fixture in the family home.

Unfortunately, the joys of owning a pet go hand-in-hand with the heartbreak of losing one. Death is an unavoidable fact of life but the grieving process can help kids learn how to cope with other losses that they will encounter throughout life. While it may be impossible to shelter your child from the loss of a pet, you can still help them cope with it.

We've compiled a list of 7 helpful tips that you can make use of when broaching the sensitive topic of the loss of a pet with your child. The advice that follows will help you better understand how young children view death, what to say, how to help them cope and most importantly, how to honour the memory of your beloved pet as a family.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James Rae". The signature is stylized and cursive.

James Rae
'Top Dog' at Talking Stones



01

UNDERSTANDING HOW YOUNG CHILDREN VIEW DEATH

There's a special bond that is shared between a child and their pet and it is incredibly important for you to acknowledge this. Your child's relationship with their pet is wonderfully unique and there's an undeniable innocence shared between them that makes this type of friendship so admirable. Pets are usually the first to greet kids in the morning and are the ones who excitedly await their return home. It could be that your child relies on your pet as a source of comfort and companionship when they are sick, upset, feeling sad, uncomfortable or lonely.

It is important for you to understand how young children view death. They do not see it in the same way as adults do and they often have trouble understanding the permanence of death. Young children can find it especially challenging to fully understand that death is forever, so they may often walk around looking for their pet and asking where they are. You'll need to have the right response and answers ready for any questions they may have. Be ready to encounter a wide variety of emotions from your child. Some children may cry, while others may not be ready to process the event for a while.

When dealing with a sensitive little one who doesn't necessarily understand what has happened, always be honest and patient. Make time to talk with them and allow them to express their feelings.

As with any tough issue, take a moment to consider your child's age, their life experience and maturity level. This will help you gauge how much information your child needs to hear and what they can handle.



02 BE HONEST

Always be honest. Many well-meaning adults will often try to explain death in terms of going to sleep and not waking up. You may even be tempted to lie and say that your pet ran away and might not come back. Lying to your child, no matter how well-meaning the underlying intention may be, probably won't alleviate the sadness about losing a pet. If the truth does surface, your child may possibly be angry that you lied. Always telling the truth will help you avoid instilling fear in your child, avoid confusion and help you not to have to perpetuate a lie.

03 HOW TO BREAK THE NEWS

One of the toughest aspects of dealing with the loss of a pet is breaking the news to kids. Although it is a sensitive and difficult conversation to have with your child, do not put it off. It's a good idea to tell your child as soon as it happens. Delaying the conversation may bring up feelings of betrayal and resentment.

Try and have the conversation on a one-to-one basis. Talk to your child in a place where they feel comfortable and safe, some place where they won't be easily distracted.

Keep it simple, be direct and use age-appropriate language. Don't avoid the words "death" or "dying". For younger children, you may want to limit the amount of detail about the death that you share with them.

Try not to use euphemisms as they could make things more difficult for your child to understand. Avoid euphemisms such as “put to sleep” or “went away”. Statements like these can create a lot of anxiety and confusion at bedtime or even activities that require you to leave the house. For young children especially, even saying something along the lines of “Fluffy got sick and went to sleep. She’s not going to wake up” can cause a lot of fear and anxiety about loved ones who may get sick, fearing that they’re going away too.

Be prepared to answer questions about what happens to a pet after it dies. Your reply will depend on your own understanding of death, belief and your child’s age. Be sure to have some optimistic answers ready.

If your pet is very old and doesn’t have that many good days left ahead or is battling with a terminal illness, consider talking to your child before the death occurs. Many children want the opportunity to say goodbye beforehand and some children may be emotionally mature enough to comfort their pet during the process.

If euthanizing your pet is the most compassionate option left, you may want to explain the following with your child:

- The veterinarian has done everything they can for your pet.
- Your pet would never get better.
- That this is the kindest way to take your pet’s pain away.
- Your pet will have a peaceful death. Reassure your child that your pet won’t feel scared.

If the death of your pet is sudden or as a result of an unfortunate accident, calmly explain what has happened. Allow your child’s questions to guide how much information you share.

So what do you say? You can say something like: “Buster died this morning and he’s not coming back and I’m very sad about it. It’s okay for you to be sad too.”





04

SHARE YOUR GRIEF WITH YOUR CHILD

Tell them that you're sad too and that it's okay to be sad or mad. Young children look to their parents as a model for behaviour, they closely watch your reaction to determine how they should react to a situation. Sharing your grief with your child not only lets them know that it's okay to grieve but provides a precious moment of intimacy between the two of you.

Don't feel as if you need to hide your own sadness about losing your pet. By talking openly about the loss and showing how you feel, you are showing your child that it's okay to talk about their feelings or cry when they feel sad and lonely. Your child will find comfort knowing that they're not alone in feeling sad.

You might even want to share stories about pets that you lost as a child and how difficult it was to say goodbye. By sharing your grief and being open with your child about the realities of death, you are letting them know that it's natural to feel all of those emotions.



*"I have learned that
grief is another
name for love"*



05

HELPING YOUR CHILD COPE

It can be a challenging and difficult process helping your child cope with the loss of the family pet. Kids experience a whole range of emotions besides sadness after the death of a pet. They may have some guilt about times that they were unkind or didn't take care of the pet as promised, while some kids may feel angry and frustrated that their pet couldn't get better.

Help your child heal by doing the following:

Be there for them

The most important thing you can do to help your child cope with the loss of a pet is simply to be there for them. Take as much time as you need to guide them through the grieving process. Always be patient, listen carefully when they share their feelings and be sure to give them lots of reassuring hugs and cuddles. Your child will remember your compassion and understanding long after the memory of losing their pet has faded.

Reassure them that they won't always feel this way

Reassure your child that it is natural to feel all the emotions associated with the loss of a pet. Be sure to tell them that these emotions may be difficult to deal with at first but they will get better over time. Let them know that it is okay to not want to talk about them at first and that you will always be there for them when they are ready.

Make use of age-appropriate resources

There are a number of age-appropriate books available that discuss the topic of death in language and terms that kids can understand. You might find it useful to use books or videos as resource to help your child heal and move on.

Maintain your child's normal routine

It is better to keep your child active and involved in their normal activities while they work through the grieving process. Although you might be tempted to have your child skip a few music lessons or miss a play-date because they feel sad, it's incredibly important to encourage them to maintain their normal routine. It could be harmful in the long run if your child becomes used to withdrawing themselves from friends and activities they enjoy when they feel sad.

Watch for warning signs

Keep a close eye on your child and watch for signs that they may be struggling with grief. Everyone reacts to the loss of a loved one differently and some kids may have a hard time letting go. If your child displays constant sadness (continuing for more than a month), has trouble sleeping, doesn't want to participate in activities they previously enjoyed or experiences difficulties in school following the death of a pet, it could mean that they're really struggling with grief. In these situations, it may be appropriate to consider counselling. A few sessions with a counsellor or child therapist could be the best option for a child that is struggling to reconcile their loss.



*"What greater
gift than the
love of a pet"*





06

GIVING YOUR PET A DIGNIFIED SEND-OFF

The end of life decisions you make about pet cremation or burial will likely be one of the last thoughtful things you do for your cherished family companion. You'll want to reassure your child that your pet will be handled with care, compassion and dignity during their final send-off. Your child's age and maturity level will determine how much detail you share with them about the process.

If you decide on cremation, there are cremation providers throughout Australia that offer professional, prompt and dignified cremation services. There are many options from which you can choose but make sure that the pet cremation procedure is explained in full to give you complete confidence that your beloved pet is treated with respect. You may decide on a communal or individual cremation. Perhaps you feel that it is necessary for your children to be reunited with their pet as soon as possible to assist them with the healing process.

Whatever you decide, you should choose an option that is right for your family. After all, a dignified send-off is the final act of love that you can give your pet.



07

REMEMBERING YOUR PET

Many children feel better about the loss of a pet if they can participate in some kind of farewell ceremony or memorial service for the animal. Help your child find special ways to honour their pet's memory and celebrate their life in a unique way. It can be as simple as having them draw a picture or write a letter to their pet. Your child might want to plan and arrange a memorial service in your garden. Whatever the case, allow them to remember their pet in a way that means the most to them. This gives them a chance to work through their loss in a constructive and meaningful way.

Help your child arrange a farewell ceremony

You'll find that even children are driven to do something extraordinary in memory of a loved one or cherished pet. A farewell ceremony may provide your child with the closure they need by giving them a chance to say their final goodbyes and to show the world how special the pet was to them. Have your child decide who they would like to have at the ceremony. This may include close family members, friends or even neighbours that they've had interactions with.

The farewell ceremony can take place in your living room, garden, backyard or even the park where your child and pet enjoyed spending time together.

Let your child help choose a pet memorial

A personalised pet memorial like the ones lovingly engraved by Talking Stones is the perfect tribute to the memory of your beloved family companion and can help ease the pain of loss. Talking Stones offer products in a wide range of styles and ever-lasting materials such as tumbled river stones, granite and sandstone. You can view and purchase their unique range online any time day or night or ask your vet or cremation provider for details. Talking Stones offer free shipping Australia-wide so finding the perfect way to cherish your beloved pet has never been more convenient.

Volunteer at an animal shelter

Volunteering at animal shelter can be a positive and constructive way for your child to honour the memory of their pet by giving back to animals in need. You could arrange a visit to an animal sanctuary, volunteer a few afternoons at a shelter or have your child fundraise or collect pet food, blankets and toys that can be donated to a worthy cause.

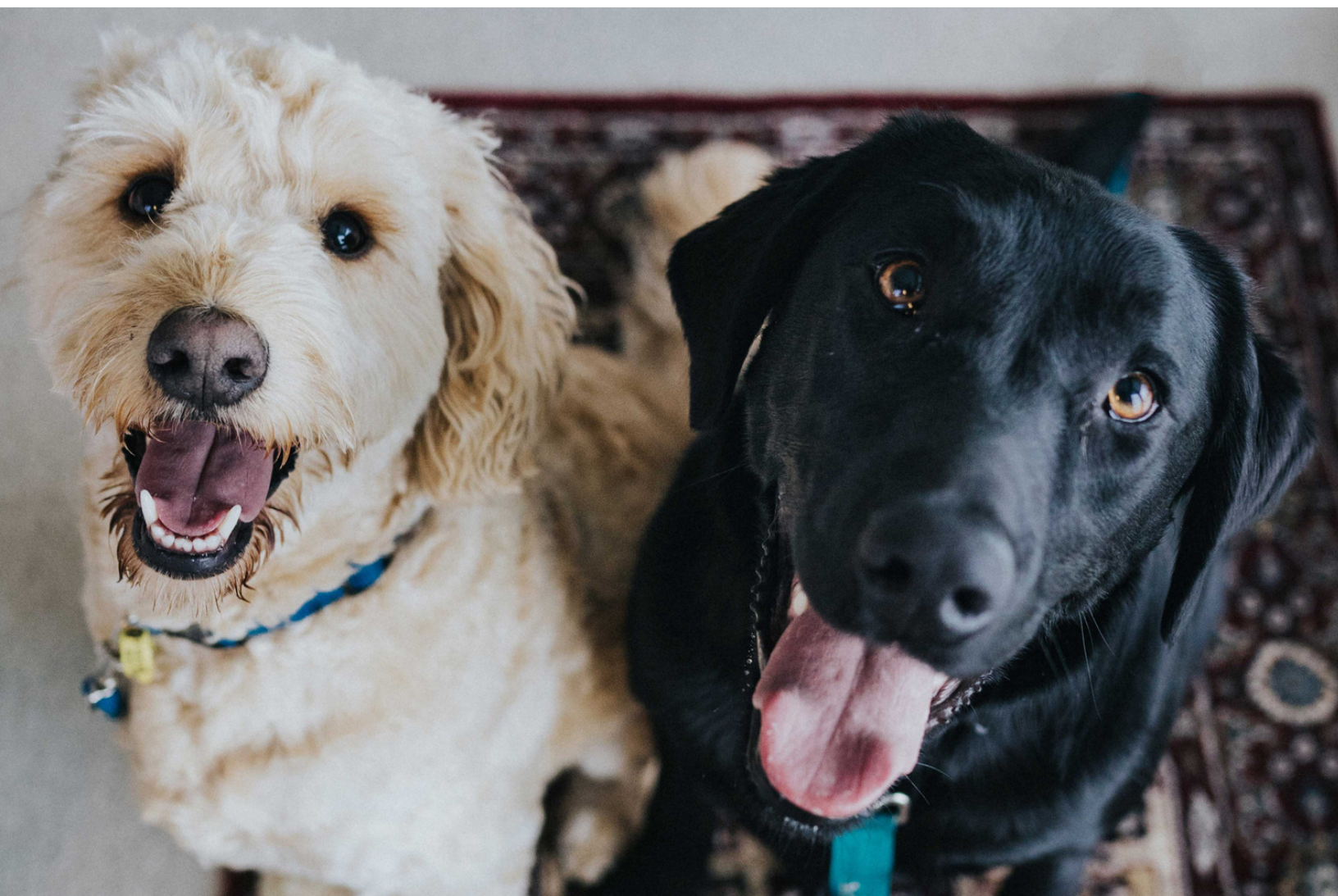


Create a scrapbook

Help your child put together a scrapbook of their favourite memories of their pet. Get your child to pick out a few photographs and encourage them to draw pictures of their pet to add to the scrapbook. Your child might want to write a letter to their pet or they may want to write a story about their favourite memory of their pet. Help them where needed and be sure to talk about and share fond memories of your pet while they are busy creating the scrapbook. Once you have finished helping your child create their special scrapbook, explain that they can keep it with them in their room and look at it whenever they miss their pet.

Speak about your pet often and with love

Talking about your pet often is perhaps one of the best ways for your child to keep the memory of them alive. Speak about your pet often and with love with your child. Share stories about your pet's funny moments and have your child tell you about their favourite memories. Reassure your child that while the pain of losing a pet will eventually fade away, the happy memories of their pet will always remain.



Helpful Resources

If your child needs further assistance coping with the loss of your pet here are some other helpful resources:

Kids Helpline:

Call 1800 55 1800 or visit kidshelpline.com.au

eHeadspace:

Call 1800 650 890 or visit eheadspace.org.au

Lifeline:

Call 13 11 14 or visit lifeline.org.au





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With more than 15 years' experience in the pet death industry, Talking Stones works with many of the country's largest vet clinics, animal welfare organisations, and most respected pet cremation providers.

Families across the country gain comfort every day from the everlasting memorial products created by Talking Stones.

Call 1300 606 605



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