

When a Pet Dies

An evidence-based guide for parents helping children grieve the loss of a beloved pet.

This Is Real Grief — The Research Is Clear

A landmark study in *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* (Massachusetts General Hospital, N=6,260) found that pet death is associated with elevated psychopathology symptoms in children — even after controlling for socioeconomic status, maternal depression, and child abuse.

63% of children with pets experience at least one pet death during their first seven years. Children form attachments to pets that mirror secure human attachment — turning to them for comfort, voicing fears, and sharing emotional experiences they will not share with adults.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry states that for many children, the death of a pet is their first real experience with loss and that children need "consolation, love, support, and affection more than complicated medical or scientific explanations."

The effect was more pronounced in boys than girls and was independent of when the death occurred — speaking to the "durability of the bond formed at a very early age."

Source: *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* (PMC) — Mental Health Effects of Pet Death. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7943653/>

Source: *Harvard Gazette* — Losing a Pet Can Affect Children's Mental Health. <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/09/>

How to Tell Your Child

Do not lie.

Do not say the pet "ran away" or "went to a farm." A child told their pet ran away may wonder why it didn't love them enough to stay. Blaming the veterinarian may make a child afraid of seeking medical help.

Use the words "death" and "dying."

"Max's body stopped working because of his illness. The veterinarian tried everything, but his body was too sick to keep going. He died this morning."

If the pet is terminally ill, prepare them in advance.

Tell your child what is happening so they can process, ask questions, and say goodbye.

If euthanasia is involved, explain it honestly.

"The veterinarian gave Max a special medicine that stopped his heart so he wouldn't be in pain anymore. It was the kindest thing we could do."

Let them see your grief.

The AAP recommends parents model healthy grief: "I am really sad too. I loved Max so much. It is okay for both of us to be sad."

Source: UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine — Helping Kids Cope with Pet Loss. <https://magazine.vetmed.ucdavis.edu>

Source: HealthyChildren.org (AAP) — When a Pet Dies. <https://www.healthychildren.org>

Age-by-Age Reactions

Infants and toddlers (under 2):

They sense absence and distress. They may become fussier or clingier. Maintain routines and provide comfort.

Preschoolers (3–5):

They may search the house or ask when the pet is coming back. They do not understand permanence. Be patient with repeated questions.

School-age (6–10):

Understand death is permanent but engage in magical thinking: "If I had fed him more, would he still be alive?" Watch for anger and physical symptoms — headaches and stomachaches are common.

Preteens and teens (11–18):

May downplay grief because it's not "cool." Prefer journaling, music, or private processing. Give space but stay available. Do not rush to replace the pet.

Children's grief responses to pet loss can surpass adults' in intensity and duration. This is not overdramatic — it reflects the depth of the attachment.

Source: AACAP — Death of Pets: Talking to Children. <https://www.aacap.org>

Memorializing and Healing

- Hold a memorial service, scatter ashes, or plant a tree in the pet's memory.
- Create a memory box with the collar, leash, toys, paw print, and photos.
- Younger children: drawing, storytelling, imaginative play about the pet.
- Teens: journaling, creating a photo collage, or writing an obituary.

Do not rush to replace the pet.

The AAP warns against buying a new pet too quickly — it sends the message the pet was replaceable. Wait until the child expresses genuine interest.

"Any time we normalize death as a part of life, the better our children will be able to cope with other losses. They learn that an experience hurts, but they will survive."

Source: UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine. <https://magazine.vetmed.ucdavis.edu>

When to Seek Professional Help

The MGH study found pet death can be "an indicator of depression in children for as long as three years or more." Watch for:

- Persistent nightmares or prolonged sleep disturbances
- Significant anxiety about other animals or people dying
- Sustained withdrawal from friends or activities
- Academic decline or regression to earlier behaviors
- Somatic symptoms (stomachaches, headaches) that do not resolve
- Expressions of guilt that do not respond to reassurance

If symptoms persist beyond a few weeks or the child cannot function normally, the AAP recommends evaluation by a qualified mental health professional.

Source: Harvard Gazette — Losing a Pet Can Affect Children's Mental Health. <https://news.harvard.edu>
