



Effectively Modeling How to Say Goodbye to Pets and Loved Ones

Our Beloved Pet

For many families, pets are an extension of their household. Millions of pets live in homes and children are commonly brought up with pets, caring for them and often sleeping with them at night. It is not unusual for a child's first experience with death to be that of a pet. Many households honor their extended family member by burial or some other form of remembrance or memorial service. When a dog, cat, gerbil, bird, fish or other animal friend dies, your child discovers valuable life lessons associated with death, grief and closure.

When comforting your child, think of tokens of remembrance that still

exist. If you still have your dog's food bowl, for example, clean it up and place it in your child's room. It may be used to hold items such as change, jewelry or special cards. If the dog bowl is not in good shape, purchase a new bowl and help your child write the pet's name across the front. The dog bowl is a way to remember the pet while putting it to another use. A pet bird may have a piece of rope that was kept in their cage. A fish may have a "fish sign" that was tucked into the rocks of the aquarium. These little reminders should help us focus on the good times, the laughs and smiles.



A pet's death is an opportunity to learn—psychologically and emotionally.

Respecting pets and allowing time to grieve through the pain that accompanies death, constructs a frame of reference when someone in the family dies, like a grandparent. By observing your disposition upon the death of a pet, your child will have a foundation for grieving and adopt your philosophies.

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Special points of interest:

- ♦ *Understanding the cycle of life.*
- ♦ *How to console a child.*
- ♦ *Using literature to build understanding.*
- ♦ *Advice from Fred Rogers.*
- ♦ *Children react differently depending upon their age.*
- ♦ *Beloved pets.*

Seeds of Love

Everything that lives eventually dies. Although we understand this, death is often a topic avoided leaving many of us unprepared for the emotions that follow. Children typically ask questions that are difficult to answer, particularly if we are grieving ourselves. A great comparison to make for chil-

dren is to relate the life cycle of a human being to that of a flower. A flower starts off as a seed and develops into a sprout. The sprout develops into a flower which eventually dies. Humans begin their life as a baby and develop into a young adult. The young adult becomes an adult who eventually dies.

It's important to explain to children that we do not understand why some of us die at various times but as adults we understand it is part of life. Just as a flower might get stepped on, or picked, some of us die well before our adult years begin.

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Seeds of Love (continued)

Others die as young adults and some of us live for a very long time.

Although we miss those that die before us, we have ways of remembering them in our hearts. By using a seed comparison, children begin to understand the cognitive aspect of permanence.

Reading books is a great way to prompt discus-



Sometimes change is good and sometimes it's not so good but change is always present.

sion. Adults sometimes shy away from picture books for older children but picture books tend to have paragraphs that are great spring boards for discussing emotions. The following titles are recommended:

The Fall of Freddie the Leaf by Leo Buscaglia. Freddie and his fellow leaves hang from a tree, changing with the passing seasons, finally falling to the ground. Buscaglia effectively de-

scribes the delicate balance between life and death. A child begins to understand that although the leaves of a tree die each year, the tree lives on just as when loved ones die, their memory lives on.

Lifetimes by Bryan Mellonie & Robert Ingpen. Beautifully illustrated, simple but profound, *Lifetimes* describes how each living thing has its own special lifetime." No matter how long they are, or how short, lifetimes are really all the same. They have beginnings, and endings, and there is living in between."

Consoling My Child

When a loved one dies, waves of emotions overcome the family. Children are often left alone to grieve. The following are recommended suggestions from HelpGuide.org:

*Express your values concerning life and death. Describe your family's belief systems such as burial practices and if you believe in an after-life.

*Be direct. Using words like "sleeping" may only add more con-

*"As with an adult, the best gift you can offer a grieving child is your loving care."
(HelpGuide.org, 2009)*

fusion to death. Explain that death means the body and heart have stopped. The person will no longer breathe or be able to move.

*Allow grieving. Avoid asking your child to stop crying because he may upset others. It's okay to be sad and it's okay to cry.

*Cherish memories. Your child may want to remember happy times or create some form of memorial, such as planting flowers or a tree.

*Display your emotions. It's okay for your child to see you cry. You're sad too.

When a Loved One Dies

Grieving may not make us feel the best and may not be comfortable for others to observe but it is something we must all endure when someone we love dies. Grieving is the only path that leads to recovery.

Tear Soup by Pat Schweibert is widely used by school counselors. Soup may be preferred for days but a brighter day will come when you feel like eating more than soup.

Older children may find comfort in chapter books with characters who are struggling with death and dying. *Beat the Turtle Drum* by Constance Green is based on a girl's reaction to her sister's accidental death. Kate discovers that although she's overwhelmed now, memories eventually bring comfort. *After the Rain* by Norma Fox Mazer tells of a fifteen old girl who mourns the loss of

special moments she and her grandfather spent together. In *There Are Two Kinds of Terrible* by Peggy Mann, a boy compares breaking his arm to the death of his mother from cancer.



One of the greatest comforts for children is for them to know that others have been where they are, experiencing some of the same frustrations, emotions, and often regrets.

Remember Mr. Rogers?

When Fred Rogers (Mr. Rogers from Mr. Rogers Neighborhood) was a young boy, he would sometimes see things on the news that upset or frightened him. Fred's mother would say, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping" (PBS Kids, 2009). As Fred grew up, he found this to be true and stated it was one of the best things about our world.

Children are some-



"Adding to our emotional vocabulary can often add to our ability to cope with what we're feeling."
(PBS Kids, 2009)

times exposed to lengthy illnesses such as cancer and many helpers can be found. A highly recommended book for these types of circumstances is *The Purple Balloon* by Chris Raschka. The author poignantly states that no one really enjoys talking about dying because it's hard work. Many "helpers" are recognized – hospice care workers, nurses, doctors, friends, neighbors, brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, grandchildren,

nieces, and nephews are just some of the people lending their support when someone is ill. Raschka writes that the good others do for someone very ill helps make dying less hard; it makes leaving easier.

Books are a great way to filter the emotions a child is feeling because words commonly bring comfort. Books serve as a starting point for discussion. Children need to understand that while doctors can make most things better, some people do not recover.

What Can I Expect?

Children grieve differently depending on their maturity and experiences. Children who are 6-8 years old may express erroneous ideas, magnifying fears or believing that magic can bring a person back to life. This age range typically blames themselves thinking they could have done something differently or acted in a way to make things right. The young child understands that death can happen to them and this realization may be met with sporadic waves of grief, tension, anger

or depression (American Cancer Society, 2009).

Older children (9-11) understand erroneous ideas and are able to correct them. Children in this age range often want details and ask questions as they put together a concrete explanation for what has happened. While a child this age understands the finality of death, they may also avoid grieving, easily becoming ashamed or embarrassed.

Be the sounding board your child needs.

Again, it's important to note that all individuals are different. You know your child better than anyone. If your family has experienced a death and you feel your child has become troubled, depressed or is exhibiting negative behaviors, do not hesitate to ask for help. School counselors are oftentimes a great place to start.

The Death of a Pet

When a pet dies, the family often enjoys recalling favorite memories. Children may find comfort in reading *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney* by Judith Viorst. Younger children can carry or keep ten buttons (or another chosen object) to represent their memories. Older children may enjoy listing their ten favorite memories in a journal.

I'll Always Love You by Hans Wilhelm is a story of a beloved dog

who grows old and can no longer climb the stairs. The boy must say goodbye but he tells the dog, "I'll always love you" before they part.

Mustard by Charlotte Graeber tells of a family's sorrow after their pet cat must be put to sleep. *Old Yeller* by Fred Gipson is a classic story of a boy and his dog.

If your child has ever wanted to keep a lizard, frog, turtle or insect



from the wild only to discover days later it has died, *Fireflies* by Julie Brinckloe is a great reference.

You will find that authors deal with the subject of death differently. Some authors discuss an after-life like heaven while others stick strictly with death as an end. You should find books that treat death in a manner consistent with your belief system.

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Daphne Morris, M.Ed., met Trevor Romain in 1992 when he visited a school as a guest speaker. Impressed by Trevor's profound and meaningful impact on students, Daphne joined The Trevor Romain Company in 2006. A former elementary school principal, Daphne holds two Master's degrees in education.

April Q&A

I don't want to frighten my child when I talk about death. How much does a child need to know?

If someone is ill or has died, begin by asking what the child knows. "Their fantasies are often very different from the actual truth!" (PBS Kids, 2009). Many children worry that something they have done is the cause or there's something they could have done to turn the situation around. Your child may worry that he is unsafe and could get sick or die as well. Your child needs to know that you will do everything you can to keep her safe and to help her grow (PBS Kids, 2009).

Children will most likely pick up your habits. If you grieve in healthy ways, he will most likely learn to grieve in the same manner. It's okay for your child to see you cry or to feel sad because she will discover that crying is a healthy emotion. Adults often want to make everything better or shield their child from the mourning process. Mourning is an opportunity to demonstrate healing. It's not always pretty, or fun but part of life is facing death.



Resources:

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