



Understanding Grief in Children

When an adult loses a beloved pet, grief is a normal reaction. It progresses through very predictable stages that have been defined as denial, sadness, depression, guilt, anger, and finally, relief or recovery. The effect of grief and loss on children is less predictable and depends upon the child's age and maturity level. *The capacity of children to understand death dictates their response to the experience of grief and loss.*

Two and Three Year Olds

Children who are two or three years old typically have no understanding of death. They often consider it a form of sleep. They should be told that their pet has died and will not return. Common reactions to this include temporary loss of speech and generalized distress. The two or three year old should be reassured that the pet's failure to return is unrelated to anything the child may have said or done. Typically, a child in this age range will readily accept another pet in place of the deceased one.

Four, Five, and Six Year Olds



Children in this age range have some understanding of death but in a way that relates to a continued existence. The pet may be considered to be living underground while continuing to eat, breathe, and play. Alternatively, it may be considered asleep. A return to life may be expected if the child views death as temporary.

Children in this age range have some understanding of death but in a way that relates to a continued existence. The pet may be considered to be living in the sky, underground or in heaven while continuing to eat, breathe, and play. Alternatively, it may be considered asleep in another location. A return to life or to the home may be expected if the child views death as temporary.

Children at this age often feel that any anger they had for the pet may be responsible for its death. This view should be refuted because they may also translate this belief to the death of family members in the past. Some children also see death as contagious and begin to fear that their own death or that of others they care for is imminent. They should be reassured that their death is not likely.

Manifestations of grief often take the form of disturbances in bladder and bowel control, eating, and sleeping. This is best managed by parent-child discussions that allow the child to express feelings and concerns. Several brief discussions are generally more productive than one or two prolonged sessions.

Seven, Eight, and Nine Year Olds

The irreversibility of death becomes real to these children. They usually do not personalize death, thinking it cannot happen to them. However, some children may develop concerns about death of their parents. They may become very curious about death and its implications. Parents should be ready to respond frankly and honestly to questions that may arise.

Several manifestations of grief may occur in these children, including the development of school problems, learning problems, antisocial behavior, hypochondriacal concerns, or aggression. Additionally, withdrawal, over-attentiveness, or clinging behavior may be seen. Based on grief reactions to loss of parents or siblings, it is likely that these symptoms may not occur immediately but several weeks or months later.

Ten and Eleven Year Olds

Children in this age range generally understand death as natural, inevitable, and universal. Consequently, these children often react to death in a manner very similar to adults.

Adolescents

Although this age group also reacts similarly to adults, many adolescents may exhibit various forms of denial. This usually takes the form of a lack of emotional display. Consequently, these young people may be experiencing sincere grief without any outward manifestations. It is important to encourage adolescents to discuss their feelings about death.



Young Adults

Loss of a pet can be particularly difficult at this age, especially if the pet has been a family member for many years. Some psychologists say that loss of such a pet represents a “rite of passage” to adulthood. Young adults need the same opportunities to voice their feelings as any of the other age groups.

Summary

Professional bereavement counselors are available in most cities. Do not be afraid to seek professional advice if you have questions about the experience of grief and pet loss. The normal balance in a family can be so disrupted that, occasionally, it is helpful to solicit outside assistance. If you are having difficulty with your child's grief, please contact the hospital. We can provide assistance and contact numbers of professionals who can help you and your family.

This client information sheet is based on material written by Ernest Ward, DVM
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