



General Pet Loss and Children's Grief Overview

Helping Early School-aged Children

(five-years-old through eight-years-old)

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This is a basic guide and is intended to help adults as they support children through pet loss and grief.

In General

Children:

- deal with grief differently than adults due to their age and stage of development, but they grieve just as deeply.
- are unique and should be encouraged to grieve in their own, individual ways.
- need to be provided with age appropriate knowledge and understanding about life and death, taught a variety of coping skills, and receive solid emotional support from family and friends.



Getting Specific

When pets die, Early School-aged children:

- are “magical thinkers” and tend to personify “Death” as the Grim Reaper, Dark Angel, or a monster-like form.
- imagine “Death” as an entity from which they can run away and hide.
- tend to feel angry with pets who die because they don't understand why the pets didn't run away or hide from “Death.”
- view death as violent and yet reversible. On television, actors are killed on one show and appear the following day on another. Cartoon cats are flattened, then get up and walk again. These images often lead to morbid discussions and elaborate stories about death.

Helping Children

Adults can:

- understand that “magical thinking” means children believe the world revolves around them and is, for the most part, under their control.
- realize that, because children think they are in control, they also feel responsible for events that occur in their lives, including deaths. This thinking can lead children to believe they are responsible for their pets' deaths.
- know that, around the age of eight, most children realize that death is permanent and universal. This can be a troubling time as children come to understand that everyone, including them, eventually dies.
- provide children with opportunities to talk about how they feel and answer their questions honestly and truthfully.
- reassure children that their pets' deaths were not their fault
- allow children to see their own grief expressed in normal, healthy ways so they know it is okay to be sad or angry, etc.

The amount of time children spend with their pets, as well as the emotional comfort they receive from their pets, deepens the bonds between them. Young children who think of their pets as “best friends” are often more attached than those who don't think of pets this way.

For more information, visit the Veterinary Wisdom® Resource Center at www.veterinarywisdom.com