



## **General Pet Loss and Children’s Grief Overview** ***Helping Toddlers and Preschoolers*** (two-year-olds through four-year-olds)

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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, toddlers and preschoolers:

- do not understand that death is permanent and happens to everyone.
- do not think of death as a taboo topic or think of grief as something they should hide.
- may cry, but their tears will come and go and vary in intensity.
- may ask lots of questions and be curious and willing to talk about death.



### **Helping Children**

Adults can:

- understand that, although these behavior may be alarming to adults, exploring death through play and pretending (drawing pictures, staging doll funerals, burying toys) is normal and healthy for toddlers and preschoolers.
- know that experimentation helps toddlers and preschoolers process new information. Usually, adults should simply observe and not interfere.
- answer questions honestly and truthfully.
- allow children to see their own grief expressed in normal, healthy ways so they know it is okay to be sad or angry, etc.
- encourage children to express how they feel. If children don’t possess positive coping skills, the grief they exhibit may signal suppressed emotions. Behaviors like acting out (tantrums, breaking rules), clinging or withdrawing, on-going physical complaints (fatigue, aches and pains, upset stomach) or changes in personality may be used by young children (especially pre-verbal ages) to release their true feelings of pain and anxiety.

The amount of time children spend with their pets, as well as the emotional comfort they believe their pets provide, deepens the bonds between them. Children who think of their pets as “best friends” are often more attached than children who don’t think of their pets in this way.

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