



by Karen Stephens

# Ways to Help Children Cope When a Family Pet Dies

In the children's book, *When a Pet Dies*, Fred Rogers (aka Mr. Rogers), wisely tells children, "When sad things happen, the best place to be is near someone you love . . . someone who can understand how you are feeling." When a child's pet dies, that "someone" is most often a parent or grandparent. Coping with a pet's death will more than likely be the first time your child experiences one of life's unchangeable truths — it ends. Whatever the sweet elixir of life is, at some point, it runs out. Ugh, what a bitter pill to swallow.

It's also true that, "Grief is the price you pay for love," as Earl Grollman says in *Talking About Death: A Dialogue between Parents and Children*. And if anyone gives lots of love, it's a pet. When a pet is considered a bona fide family member, children's grief can be as great and intense as an adult's grief. For some kids, pet death is even more traumatic than losing a human family member. After all, pets give children unconditional love and never dream of sending them to time out! A pet listens hours on end to a child's grievances, but never tells a soul. No wonder kids and pets become best friends forever. To lose such a trusted ally tears at kids' heartstrings.

As parents we watch our young children struggle with the harsh reality of death. But like it or not, the job of helping kids face facts falls squarely on our shoulders. As a parent, you'll need to put on your counselor hat so you can help your child cope with the shock and sadness of it all. With time, together you'll cross a bridge of renewed happiness and cherished pet memories. Once that trail is crossed, you'll each be closer and stronger for it.

Here are some ideas to start you off on the right foot:

- **Give children many opportunities to ask questions.** They'll have a lot you can't answer, but you can say, "I don't know, but I've wondered about that, too." Be patient when children ask the same questions over and over. Why it happened, how it happened, and where a dead pet goes will be of great concern to kids. And they'll wonder why it can't be changed. You'll repeat and re-phrase answers many times.
- **Respond to children based on their ability to understand.** The younger the child, the simpler explanations about facts and emotions should be.
- **Keep explanations short, based on children's ages and interests.** Their body language will let you know when they've heard enough. When children become bored or overwhelmed, take a play break.
- **When a pet dies, use the word dead, not a metaphor for death.** Saying, "We lost Lucky last night," could lead a child to think Lucky is still alive, but lost in the neighborhood. Honestly explain that death means a pet's heart stopped beating. The pet will no longer breathe, eat, sleep, or run and play.
- **Be honest and specific about causes of death.** If we tell kids, "We took kitty to the vet's to put him to sleep," kids may wait weeks for kitty to come home from napping.
- **If you euthanize a pet, include children in the decision.** Tell them the vet will use special medicine so their pet's heart will peacefully stop beating. It's up to you and your vet to decide if a child should be present when a pet is euthanized. It will depend on their age, understanding, and emotional state.
- **If illness or accident caused the death, simply explain it without too much graphic detail — unless asked.** Tell your child what you did to help the pet, if

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- anything was possible. When using new vocabulary, such as “emergency surgery” explain what it means to avoid confusion.
- **Reassure children that they aren’t responsible for the death.** Since children often misunderstand cause and effect, reassure them that their pet didn’t die because they were “bad” or didn’t take good enough care of the pet.
  - **Remind kids there are things in life no one can change.** Some children think they should be able to reverse a pet’s death. Reassure them that not even little kids who believe in magic wishes and superheroes can bring a pet back to life.
  - **Be accepting and listen to any and all feelings.** Kids may feel shock, disbelief, confusion, denial, panic, insecurity, betrayal, abandonment, loneliness, rejection, anger, frustration, and guilt — all normal, predictable feelings we experience when losing a loved one, four-legged or two-legged.
  - **Respond with empathy and compassion.** Even when shocked by children’s frankness or the depth of their anger, acknowledge and accept their feelings. Let children know they aren’t alone in sadness and grief. To move through that grief, kids must express their feelings.
  - **Don’t expect all kids to grieve in the same way.** Some kids will cry, throw tantrums, withdraw, or ask questions non-stop; others won’t.
  - **Experiment with ways to express and sort out feelings.** Writing a thank you letter to their pet can help some kids. If your child is too young to write to express feelings, he or she can play make believe with puppets. They can also draw pictures. If your child develops a story around death, follow the lead. But don’t coax or pressure children into acting out death feelings; kids often clam up when they feel prodded.
  - **Give children chances to say good-bye.** Acceptance follows only after children can have a sense of saying good-bye to a pet. If they can’t do that literally, help them find a symbolic way to say farewell. When I was a child, we neighborhood kids held our own pet funerals. We put little stick crosses over dirt mounds where we buried our dearly departed dime-store turtles.

Children may want to make their own grave marker, or they can draw farewell pictures to place in a pet’s grave. Others may benefit from a simple family ceremony where each member retells a favorite pet memory. If a pet isn’t buried at home, children can place a remembrance, like a flower, on the pet’s sleeping area to honor the loving attachment.

- **Help children preserve pet memories.** To relieve the hurt of losing a once-in-a-lifetime friend, kids can make photo albums, assemble scrap books, or decorate a keepsake box of the pet’s sentimental items, such as a collar, ID tag, or favorite toys.
- **Use books to help children grapple with grief.** Reading good children’s books together opens the door to meaningful discussion. (See titles below.)
- **Don’t rush children to get a new pet until they are ready.** Include them in the selection of a new pet when the time rolls around. Consider visiting your local Humane Society when you begin your search.

#### Children's Books

- *Lifetimes: A Beautiful Way to Explain Death* by B. Mellonie and R. Ingpen. (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Books for Young Readers, 1983).
- *When a Pet Dies* by Fred Rogers. (New York: Putnam, 1998).
- *A Dog Like Jack* by Dyanne Disalvo-Ryan. (Holiday House, 2001).
- *I'll Always Love You* by Hans Wilhelm. (New York: Crown Books for Young Readers).
- *The Dead Bird* by Margaret Wise Brown. (New York: HarperCollins Children's Books, 1995).
- *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney* by Judith Viorst. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971).
- *The Accident* by Carole Carrick. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1981).
- *Jim's Dog Muffin* by Miriam Cohen. (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Books for Young Readers, 1996).

#### Parenting Resource Book

- *Talking About Death: A Dialogue between Parents and Children* by Earl Grollman. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991).

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**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. She writes a weekly column for parents in her local newspaper. Karen is author of two books and frequent contributor to *Child Care Information Exchange*.

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