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*Losing a pet is hard on all the family, not just the children. Allow yourself some time of your own to grieve. Please see our general handout on Coping with the Loss of a Pet for some tips and contacts to help you get through this difficult*



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# helping children cope with the loss of a pet

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*Client information series*

doyalson animal hospital  
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# helping children cope with the loss of a pet

**Be as direct and honest as possible.** Avoid euphemisms like, "put to sleep" as these words can be frightening and confusing to children. Young children (under age four) have difficulty understanding the difference between sleep and death. Therefore, always answer questions as directly as possible and in an age appropriate manner. Use words like, "Fluffy has died," or "We will give Fluffy a drug that will stop her heart."

**Don't lie to children about the circumstances surrounding pet loss.** Parents and veterinarians should refrain from making up stories to "soften the blow." Telling children that their pet "ran away" or "went to live with friends" only substitutes one kind of pain for another. Children are then left feeling abandoned wondering why their pet ran away and believing that their pet doesn't love them anymore.

**Involve children in decisions surrounding the pet's illness and death.** Children are often involved in the daily caretaking routines of their animals. It is only fair that they are included when the animal is ill or dying. Be

alert to what child development experts call "magical thinking." Children mistakenly believe that they are somehow responsible for the things that happen in their lives, including their pet's illness or death. Let children know that the animal's illness or death is/was not their fault.

**Allow involvement in the euthanasia process.** If children are well prepared for what will take place before, during, and after euthanasia and if they are given a choice about being present, they can attend the euthanasia. No child should ever be forced to be present, however.

**Talk openly with children about how they perceive death.** Understanding the situation from the child's point of view is critical. Remember that children generally do not understand the permanence of death until age seven or eight and may need reassurance from adults. It is not uncommon for children to ask the same questions over and over again. It is also typical for children to ask seemingly morbid questions about body care issues as they do not have the same taboos as adults.

**Involve children in good-bye ceremonies and in memorializing activities.** Each family member will have a different relationship with the family pet; therefore, it is critical that each person is encouraged to identify a meaningful way to say good-bye.

**Children grieve just as intensely as adults do; they just do it in different ways.** Children don't usually possess the same verbal abilities as adults for expressing their grief. Providing alternate routes for children's grief is very helpful (helping

children complete drawings and poems, expressing emotions through play, and being actively involved in memorialization).

**Act as a role model.** Adults often feel that they must shield children from the intense emotions that are a part of acute grief. However, a lack of adult response can create more confusion for children following a death. Allowing children to see their parents' emotions helps them understand that each member of the family is important and irreplaceable. It also gives children permission to express their own feelings openly.

**Use resources.** When a child's pet dies, the adults who are significant to that child should be informed of the family's loss. Significant adults can provide a structure for additional support to the child. These adults generally include relatives, friends, neighbours, teachers, and school counsellors.

**Discourage "replacement" of pets.** There is no right time for bringing a new pet into the family. Adults should sensitively explain to children it is best not to rush into getting a new pet. It is important to take time to remember their friend that has died. Then, when most family members are ready to adopt a new pet, the timing is right to welcome a new pet into the family.

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Carolyn Butler