

Pet Connection: Helping your child cope with pet's death

Universal Uclick

Published Tuesday, Sep. 27, 2011

From the goldfish won at a school carnival who didn't make it home alive to the hamster who escaped from his cage and was never seen again to the cat or dog who has been in the family for years and is now taking a final trip to the veterinarian's, the death of a pet can be a wrenching experience for a child.

Though the death of a pet can be a sad and perhaps scary experience for a child, it is also a chance for parents to set a model for grief and death. For most children, this will be the first time they deal with death, and it's an opportunity to teach them how to deal with painful experiences.

Experts advise using activities to help children recognize and work through their emotions, such as having a child draw or paste a picture of the pet, or finish this sentence: "Thinking about (my pet's name) dying makes me feel ... " Such exercises allow parents, grandparents, teachers and other important adults in the lives of children to open avenues for discussion, as well as to help set the tone for appropriate ways of grieving.

Perhaps a little disconcerting to many parents, some experts even ask children to consider what's happened to their pet's body. Such openness is important with children, even though it may run counter to parents' own experience as a child. If you don't give children the answers to their questions, the answers they make up may be even worse than the truth. It's most important to be truthful and factual. Let the child know that it's OK to talk about anything, and it's OK to have the feelings they do.

Some other suggestions for parents:

- Don't sugarcoat the facts. Parents need to remember not to use euphemisms. Telling a child a pet was "put to sleep" may leave the child afraid to fall asleep himself.
- Follow the child's lead. Children may even benefit from seeing the body of the departed pet. Ask the child, and prepare by explaining that the pet won't meow or won't lick.
- Use more than words. Children are not as focused on words as we are. They may want to play the death scene over and over, which may be disturbing to adults, but it's their way of working through it. Children also can express their feelings through painting and drawing, and cutting and pasting.
- Share your own grief, but don't burden your child. It's very important for a child to see your feelings and to know sadness is acceptable, but it's too much to ask your child to be your support at such times. Turn to other adults for this need.
- Don't rush your child. Grief can be a long process.

While it isn't going to be easy, when handled well, the death of a pet can leave children well-prepared for the losses we all face in our lives.

A pet's death, in other words, can be a final gift of love and learning to a child.

© Copyright The Sacramento Bee. All rights reserved.

Pet Connection is produced by a team of pet-care experts headed by veterinarian Dr. Marty Becker and journalist Gina Spadafori. The two are also the authors of several best-selling pet-care books. Email them at petconnection@gmail.com or visit www.petconnection.com. Back columns: www.sacbee.com/spadafori.