

When a Pet Dies...

For many children, pet death is the first time they will experience grief and loss. Children's reactions to the death of a pet will depend upon their age and developmental level. Guiding children through the loss of a beloved pet in a positive way will help them to handle grief in the future.

- Make the child as comfortable as possible by holding their hand and using a soothing voice.
- Avoid confusion, mistrust, and anxiety by being honest about what has happened.
- Use concrete words such as "death," "dead," or "dying" when talking to a child. For example, using the term "put to sleep" makes children wonder why their pet abandoned them.
- Depending on the cause of death, allowing the child to actually see their pet can be beneficial. Very young children should be told that when a pet dies, it stops moving, hearing, and seeing. This may have to be repeated to them several times.
- Whenever possible, allow the child to say "goodbye" to their pet.
- Allow the child to see you mourn. Do not hide your own sad feelings. Let children know it is normal to miss pets after they die.
- There is no right or wrong way for children to mourn their pets. Children may want to bury their pet, make a memorial, or have a ceremony. Involve children in the decision making process of how they want to memorialize their friend.
- It is not uncommon for children to draw pictures of their pet, write them a letter, or create poems or stories. They may even draw a picture of their pet underground. This is normal behavior as they process what has taken place.
- Questions about the pet can resurface months after the pet is gone. Encourage children to come to you anytime and always offer reassurance and comfort.
- Don't rush into getting a 'replacement' pet.

