

SAYING GOODBYE TO YOUR PET:

Help your child understand and grieve

Euthanasia offers a unique opportunity to help your child understand and process death in a healthy way. How you talk to your child will depend on three things: the closeness of the child-pet bond, your child's age and your child's maturity level. Here are some general ideas and tips for helping children (and yourself) through the grieving process of a beloved pet.

GENERAL COMMUNICATION TIPS

- Be as clear as possible. Instead of saying, "Spot's just going to sleep for a long time," say, "The veterinarian has done everything she can do, but Spot won't get better. Spot will get a shot that stops his heart from beating. He won't feel any pain."
- Ask your veterinarian or a close family friend to help if the thought of breaking the news to your child is too overwhelming.
- Let your child know it's OK to feel sad, lonely, frustrated or angry about losing a pet. Encourage open discussion, and don't feel like you have to hide your feelings. Modeling healthy grief helps children learn how to cope and lets them know they aren't alone in their sadness.
- It's common for kids to ask about what happens to pets after they die, so be prepared to answer—even if it's a truthful admission that you don't know.
- Let other caregivers in your child's life, like teachers, know about what your family is going through.

AGE-SPECIFIC ADVICE

Every child is different, but here are some general guidelines about what kids can understand by age. As with other ages, reassure your child that he or she did nothing to cause the pet's death.

Up until around **5 years old**, children are more in tune with your emotions than their own. You may not want to have your young child present during the euthanasia so you can experience your emotions in full without worrying about your child's interpretation.

Though it's unlikely your child will understand, tell him or her that the pet will die and won't be coming home. Reassure your child that he or she did nothing to cause your pet's death.

Children between **5 and 6 years old** may have a general understanding of death, though they may not be able to grasp its permanence. At this age, grieving children may exhibit habit changes (less appetite, difficulty sleeping) and should be given opportunities to share their emotions. Starting at this age, most children are able to decide if they want to be present for the euthanasia.

Children between **7 and 9 years old** are able to understand that death is permanent and may start to worry about losing other loved ones. Their grief may cause problems at school and behavior changes, so your child may become more aggressive or clingy toward you.

Children between **10 to 11 years old** can typically understand that death is natural and inevitable. They often use their parents as a model for how to respond.

Adolescents are at a stage when they want to be treated like adults one day and be comforted like children the next, so responses to pet loss can vary a lot. They may become frustrated and try to fight what's happening because they feel like everyone is giving up. You can reach out to your veterinarian for support in explaining that you've done all you can.

WAYS TO CELEBRATE BEFOREHAND

- Hire a photographer or videographer to record happy moments of your family playing with your pet.
- Create a bucket list of things you want to do with your pet before he or she passes.

WAYS TO MEMORIALIZE YOUR PET

- Create a scrapbook of your pet's life.
- Write down some of your favorite memories and share them with each other. If your kids are too young to write, have them draw pictures or make a collage.
- Plant a tree or bush in your pet's favorite spot.