

Children and Pet Euthanasia

Many children will experience death and grief for the first time when they lose a pet. It is important that this loss is handled with care, thought and sensitivity. While this is primarily the parent's role, we also have a responsibility when in the veterinary practice, where we often have to deliver bad news in front of children, or when clients ask our advice regarding how to tell their children about the death of a pet, or how to handle discussions of euthanasia with their children.

As far as home euthanasia goes, some people believe that children under the age of eight are too young to be present when their pet is put to sleep. However I have seen children as young as four be present (with excellent parental support) and appear to suffer no ill effects.

Basically as parents, you should make individual decisions, based on your own feelings and beliefs, and your child's temperament. If your child is going to be present at euthanasia, it is best to have a pre-euthanasia discussion with your vet if at all possible, to fully understand what will be happening, so that you can explain everything in advance to your child. A good way to explain a decision of euthanasia to a child is along the following lines "because everyone loves Fluffy so much, we don't want her to suffer. Although we will miss her we are going to help her to die, because she is in pain now, and we cannot fix her", or similar words, appropriate to the circumstance and the child's age. Child psychologists agree that euphemisms should be avoided, and that the truth should be gently told.

Veterinarians and vet techs can often help you explain the medical aspects of death to children: we can explain gently how euthanasia is done, why it is a kindness, how the pet will look after it has died and so forth. We can also help children understand why a pet did not survive an illness or accident, and we can act as 'lay' counsellors at a time when you may be swamped by your own grief. How you and we deal with children's grief can have a long-term effect on their ability to deal with death and loss in the future.

It is also of course, important to consider the wishes of the children with this issue. If you or your child does not feel the need for them to be present during the euthanasia, then an alternative is to invite them back into the room after the euthanasia procedure to say goodbye. Seeing that the pet is actually dead often helps give children a sense of closure.

Many different things factor in to how a child will deal with death. Their age and maturity are important factors, together with the pre-existing relationship between them and their pet. The circumstance of the pet's death is important, as are any other events or losses that the child has experienced. The ability of the parents and others (including veterinary staff) to provide support will also play an important role in helping the child work through the grief.

It is commonly agreed that being honest is the most important thing. It is not necessary to discuss all details, however some older children respond well to being included in family-pet discussions. Be honest regarding pet death. Be sensitive, but do not lie. Advise against euphemisms, untruths or half-truths.

- Give the child permission to work through their grief. This includes telling teachers about the pet's death and encouraging the child to talk freely even if the owners are distressed by it. The giving of hugs and reassurance is beneficial, as is discussing death, dying and grieving openly and honestly.
- Advise owners that showing their own grief in front of their child is healthy as well. Hiding grief might make children wonder why the parents don't miss the presence of the pet in the

house. In extreme cases this may lead to them wondering if parents would be sad if they died. Grieving and crying in front of a child validates to the child that these emotions are OK to express.

- Advise owners about creative ways to help children memorialise their pet. This can include setting up a 'shrine', with photos, incense and candles, planting a tree, or just drawing picture. Some children might like to start a journal of pet memories.

Children's Age and Grief

Under Two:

Children under two can sense stress in the house even though they do not know the cause. They need extra comfort and attention during the grieving period. Infants and very young children may not understand the death of a pet, but they are very aware of the tension and change in emotional state of those around them. Advise parents that reassuring them by hugging and holding them, and keeping the household routine as normal as possible will help.

Toddlers and preschool age:

Children 2 to 5 may believe they are invincible. Death to them is seen on TV with resurrections common in cartoons. Often these cartoon characters are animals, which does not help them to understand the finality of death for their own pets. Explaining death without euphemism will help them better understand it later. Children under seven may need help in understanding that the pet will not wake up or come home.

School age on:

While young school age children have a better grasp on the finality of death, in their minds the world revolves around them. As a result, guilt may play a part more heavily in their grieving processes. For example, if they have had thoughts like "I hate walking Fluffy every day, I wish she was gone", then Fluffy *does* die, they may end up believing that they were in fact the cause of their pet's death. Children between the ages of 7 and 12 can understand the permanence of death. They may ask many questions about how and why the pet died. Children over 12 years of age (adolescents) may have a very difficult time recovering from grief and may not be open about how much emotional pain they are experiencing.