

UNDERSTANDING GRIEF IN CHILDREN

When an adult loses a beloved pet, grief is a normal reaction. It progresses through very predictable stages which have been defined as denial, sadness, depression, guilt, anger, and finally, relief (or recovery). The effect of grief and loss on children is less predictable and depends upon the child's age and maturity level. *The capacity of children to understand death dictates their response to the experience of grief and loss.*

Two and Three Year Children

Young children typically have no life experiences upon which to draw when they face the loss of a pet. They may consider it a form of sleep. They should be told that their pet has died and will not return.

Two and three year old children should be reassured that the pet's absence is unrelated to anything the child may have said or done. Usually, a child in this age range will easily accept another pet in place of the dead one. Although the child may be unaware of the concept of death, stress in the household can be detected. It is advisable to stick to routines and provide care and reassurance for the young child.

Four, Five, and Six Year Old Children

Children in this age range have some understanding of death but in a way that relates to a continued existence. The pet may be considered to be living underground while continuing to eat, breathe, and play. Alternatively, it may be considered asleep. A return to life may be expected if the child views death as temporary. Some television cartoons may suggest to children that it is possible to return from death.

These children often feel that any anger they had toward the pet may be responsible for its death. This view should be discouraged because they may also translate this belief to the death of family members. Some children also see death as contagious and begin to fear that their own death (or that of others) is imminent. They should be reassured that their death is not likely.

Manifestations of grief may take the form of alterations in bladder and bowel control, eating habits, and sleeping. The child should be encouraged to talk with the parent and voice concerns about what has happened. In this age group, a few brief discussions may be more productive than one or two lengthy sessions.

Seven, Eight, and Nine Year Old Children

Children in this age group know that death is irreversible and they are capable of intense grief. They usually do not personalize death, thinking it cannot happen to themselves. However, some children may develop concerns about death of their parents. They may become very curious about death and ask questions that, on the surface, appear morbid. These questions are natural and parents should

respond frankly and honestly.

Grief may be expressed in a variety of ways. Problems may arise at school with learning and behavior. Interpersonal skills with adults and peers may deteriorate. In rare cases, grief-related anxiety may be expressed through acts of aggression. Additionally, withdrawal, overattentiveness, or clinging behavior may be seen. Parents should remain alert and attentive, as the difficulties may not arise for several weeks, or even months.

Ten and Eleven Year Old Children

Children in this age range are usually able to understand that death is natural, inevitable, and universal. Consequently, these children often react to death in a manner very similar to adults.

Adolescents

Although this age group also reacts similarly to adults, many adolescents may exhibit various forms of denial. This may take the form of a total lack of emotion. They may also act out their pain through antisocial acts. Adults should not expect the grief process to follow a particular time-frame with teenagers. Because the teenage years are fraught with excess emotion, some situations require that the parent offer as much reassurance about pet death as would be given to a young child.

Young Adults

Loss of a pet can be particularly hard at this age, especially if the pet has been a family member for many years. Some psychologists say that, in effect, loss of such a pet represents a “rite of passage” to adulthood. Young adults need the same opportunities to voice their feelings as any of the other age groups.

Summary

Professional bereavement counselors are available in most cities. Do not be afraid to seek professional advice if you have questions about the experience of grief and pet loss. The normal balance in a family can be so disrupted that, occasionally, it is helpful to solicit outside assistance.