

Creating Compassionate Classrooms

Children and pet loss: Guidance for teachers



The loss of a companion animal can be distressing for children and may well affect a child's ability to focus and concentrate on their work in the classroom. This resource helps provide guidance for teachers on supporting a child suffering this type of grief.

Loss can result from death or through enforced separation perhaps because of divorce, or the child being taken into care or families having to surrender their animals. The bereavement may be coinciding with the child going through additional upheaval, therefore needs to be treated sensitively with some awareness of the circumstances leading to the loss or separation. Most children are very attached to their pets, viewing them as a best friend and confidante, and maybe the only one who understands them. When that bond is broken, they may feel sad and lonely. Feelings of numbness, disbelief and denial are common.

The child may be acting out or being disruptive in the classroom due to their bereavement, likewise they may become withdrawn. There may be anger towards a veterinarian who could not save their animal's life or towards a parent who rehomed a pet or returned them to a shelter because of divorce or other change in circumstances. A child may also feel guilt, thinking that something they said or did contributed to the animal's death or rehoming.

The death of a pet may be a child's first experience of death. It is important that it is handled sensitively

and honestly as this can help children to develop understanding and resilience for coping with loss in the future. Children can be introduced to responses and actions found to be helpful in times of grief. They can be shown that it is beneficial to share and discuss problems, and to talk about feelings, to reach out to others for support. And that trying to blot out sad or frightening situations is not helpful in the long term.

Children have varying levels of attachment to their pets. Some may take the loss in their stride. However, many will find the loss painful, especially if it was a very special pet, a first pet or where the child has experienced other losses or turmoil - for example, loss of a family member, change of school, being taken into care or an upheaval in living arrangements. Studies have shown that pets can be particularly significant to children with additional support needs. These studies found that pets provide unconditional love and support. They constitute simple relationships free from conflict that don't overstep boundaries when compared with humans relationships¹.

The child's age and their understanding of death and dying will influence their response to pet loss. The child's parent may already have advised you of the loss. We would encourage this, but privately, as some children may use this information to bully the grieving child.

Any questions asked by children should be answered in a simple, honest and age appropriate way.



Broadly speaking:

- **Children up to four years of age** have little concept of death and its permanence. However, they are likely to miss the animal's presence and be aware of tensions in the family. They may show grief through behavioural disturbances. They may ask when their pet is coming back, and it is essential to be honest with them and let them know the pet will not return. Do not refer to the death as 'going to sleep' as some children may then fear going to sleep in case they die. Reassure the child that the pet's death was not due to anything they said or did.
- **Four to six-year-olds** may have some understanding that death is permanent but may ask more in-depth questions. A child in this age group may develop a fear that they or another loved one will die. Again they may exhibit behavioural disturbances or act out scenarios in violent play. They may also have some toilet 'accidents' at school. Encourage the child to share their feelings or express them through drawing or storytelling.
- **Seven to nine-year-olds** have a deeper understanding of the permanence of death and may have many more questions about death and what happens after an animal dies. Depending on their religious experience, they may wonder if their companion has gone to Heaven or an after life. They may be concerned that a parent or family member may die, which may cause the child to become insecure and clingy. Behavioural problems may arise in the classroom and it's important to realise these are part of the grief response. Help the child express and explore their feelings without overwhelming them. If difficulties continue in class, seek help from school counsellors.
- **Ten to twelve-year-olds** are likely to react to pet loss in a similar way to adults, but may still struggle to cope with the bereavement and are likely to need support through the grieving process. They will look to adults to understand how to act when grieving. If they have already experienced the death of a person, this could cause those feelings to resurge and resurface. They may wonder if their grief is normal and might fear death or even think of suicide, to join their deceased pet. If they express these feelings during school time, you must report this to the school's Child Safeguarding Officer/Designated Safeguarding Lead.
- **Adolescents** have a full understanding of death, but this is a difficult life stage. Teenagers are still emotionally immature. They need a strong role model to help them work through their feelings. Adolescents can have a particularly strong bond with a pet. This age group faces the transition from childhood to adulthood and the added pressure of exams and of interpersonal relationships, and a pet can be a real comfort. They might feel embarrassed about showing their grief and may need additional support to avoid becoming overwhelmed.

It is important to acknowledge the loss of a companion animal whatever the age of the child. Feelings should always be acknowledged and recognised and never dismissed or belittled.



Euthanasia

We have produced a resource for parents giving them guidance on explaining euthanasia in more detail to their child, but as a teacher, you may also need to deal with questions in this connection. A good place to start is the meaning of the word. Euthanasia is derived from Greek and means 'a good death'. Explain that it is the kind way to prevent an animal going through unnecessary suffering in situations where the pet's quality of life is not good and there is no hope of recovery. Avoid mentioning that the process is carried out using drugs or 'anaesthetics'. Such use of language could make the child fearful of falling asleep, or of having an anaesthetic.

Explaining pet death to a child

The bond with a companion animal can be very strong and it's important to bear in mind that grieving for an animal invokes the same stages of grief that follow the loss of a human relative: denial, anger, depression, bargaining and acceptance. Children may express grief more through behaviour than words. If the loss or death of the animal has been in traumatic circumstances, it's going to be particularly hard for the child.

Traumatic pet loss

Traumatic loss could result from a pet being involved in a road traffic accident, fatal abuse in domestic violence, a pet being surrendered to a shelter, separation or divorce of a parent, a child being taken into care or forced abandonment arising from fire, floods and so on. Research by Bergler and Hoff² indicated that children who were kept with their dogs following parental separation had better long-term outcomes. A study by Hunt et al³ showed that forced abandonment of a pet during evacuation can intensify the existing trauma and increase the risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and amplify feelings of guilt.

If a child has lost or been separated from their companion animal in traumatic circumstances, they may be suffering from what is known as 'complicated grief' or 'traumatic grief' which can cause immense suffering. These children can experience a range of powerful reactions that may manifest mentally, physically and/or emotionally. These can include intrusive thoughts, nightmares, flashbacks, stomach aches, feelings of isolation, anger, irritability, stuttering, difficulty concentrating, exaggerated startle responses, detachment, being withdrawn and possible suicidal thoughts. Children may also avoid situations relating to the traumatic loss or may re-enact the event again and again through their play. Complex PTSD can affect children who have experienced repeated traumatic situations such as neglect, abuse and violence, and may have witnessed the harming or death of their pet if they have come from an abusive home. Complex PTSD is often more severe if the trauma has been experienced in early life or caused by a parent or caregiver as it can affect a child's development. Traumatic grief and post-traumatic stress are very often suffered together. A child who is suffering a bereavement or separation from a pet under these circumstances will need a greater level of support and understanding and may need professional help. As their teacher, it will be helpful for you to have a little background information with regard to the circumstances of the loss, which will help you provide the most appropriate support for your pupil.

Any trauma or loss as a result of domestic violence or coercive behaviour can cause long-term harm. Anyone needing additional support in this connection can contact the National Domestic Abuse Helpline on 0808 2000 247.



Remembering your companion

Our resource for parents, lists a number of ways they can help their child or children in remembering their companion, but below are some ways you could support a child in class to facilitate the healing process:

- Writing a letter or poem to the pet, or writing the pet's life story
- Drawing pictures of the pet, such as a portrait, or group picture with the family, or the pet on Rainbow Bridge
- Making a scrapbook with photographs
- Reading poems about pet loss
- Reading books for children about pet loss
- Thinking about any life lessons that the animal companion demonstrated and ways that the animal enriched lives, the good times shared
- Recalling funny incidents involving the animal
- Creating a 'memory jar'



Through shared activities, listening to a child's concerns and encouraging them to share feelings, adults can validate a child's grief and help to establish the knowledge that grief can be better managed as a shared experience. We must also teach children that reaching out to others is beneficial, and seek to reassure them that it is perfectly acceptable to ask for support and understanding. Both boys and girls can be encouraged into this way of thinking. Lessons learned through coping with pet loss can be invaluable in coping with other challenges as an adult.

References

1. Brooks, HL, Rushton, K, Lovell, K et al. (2018). The power of support from companion animals for people living with mental health problems: a systematic review and narrative synthesis of the evidence. *BMC Psychiatry* 18, 31. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-018-1613-2>.
2. Bergler, R &, Hoff, T (2001). The Positive influence of dogs on children in divorce crisis from the mother's perspective and of the child-dog-relationship from the child's perspective. *Conference Paper: 9th International Conference on Human-animal Interactions: People and Animals, A Global Perspective for the 21st Century*, Rio de Janeiro.
3. Hunt MG, Al-Awadi H, Johnson M (2008). Psychological sequelae of pet loss following Hurricane Katrina. *Anthrozoos*. 21(2):109–121.

Further reading

- A selection of appropriate books for young children is described at: <https://theralphsitieshop.com/childrens-pet-bereavement-books/>
- Further information on Rainbow Bridge and its origins: <https://medium.com/@humanegoods/where-does-the-term-rainbow-bridge-come-from-and-why-is-it-synonymous-with-the-loss-of-a-pet-deb9b4bd6bfe>
- *Missing my pet*, is a sensitive book about pet loss, written by Alex Lambert aged 6. Available from SCAS.

Pet bereavement support line

- Blue Cross Pet Bereavement Support Service Helpline - open from 8.30am to 8.30pm on 0800 096 6606. This service was developed by SCAS from the seminal work of Dr Mary Stewart, a founder member of the Society.

Winston's Wish

- A UK childhood bereavement charity that provides emotional and practical bereavement support to children, young people and those who care for them. <https://www.winstonswish.org/>.

About Fostering Compassion

Fostering Compassion's 'Creating Compassionate Children' programme is a groundbreaking humane education project for care experienced children who may be showing worrying behaviour towards animals or be struggling with compassion and empathy in general. Through animal assisted activities and its unique approach of sharing the stories of rescued domestic and wild animals, children are encouraged to see animals as sentient beings who can share similar emotions to them. This distinctive approach often provides a platform for the children to open up about their own neglect and turns worrying behaviour towards animals into caring, compassionate and nurturing behaviour.

Fostering Compassion's 'Connect with Compassion' programme highlights the strength and importance of the human-animal bond, recognising attachment to pets, especially in relation to the vulnerable. It works to protect this valuable bond and raise awareness of the pain and trauma that can result when it is broken, through bereavement, loss or enforced separation and the impact that can have on health and well-being.

About the Society for Companion Animal Studies

The Society for Companion Animal Studies (SCAS) was established in 1979 to promote the study of human-companion animal interactions and raise awareness of the importance of pets in society.

Over the past forty years SCAS has established itself as the leading human-companion animal bond organisation in the UK through providing education, raising awareness, encouraging best practice and influencing the development of policies and practices that support the human-companion animal bond.

SCAS consistently strives to enhance the well-being of people and animals by providing information about human-animal interactions to our members, education, health and social care professionals and to others interested in how companion animals enhance human health and quality of life.

Our work has included:

- Pet bereavement support and training
- Encouraging the adoption of positive pets in housing policies
- The role of companion animals in child health and development
- Advice on animal assisted interventions in health, education and social care settings
- Research on pet ownership, e.g. for older people, and for people living in residential care

SCAS is a membership organisation with members drawn from all of the caring professions. Membership information is available on the website.

Please check the SCAS and Fostering Compassion websites for updated information:

www.scas.org.uk | www.fosteringcompassion.org