

Creating Compassionate Care for Children: Pet bereavement guidance for parents, guardians and social workers



The loss of a companion animal can be very distressing for children as well as for older family members. This resource offers guidance for parents, guardians and social workers on supporting a child suffering this type of grief.

Pet loss can happen as a result of death (either naturally or through euthanasia) or through enforced separation (due to divorce or a child being taken into care, for example) or a family having to surrender their animals for any number of reasons. Thus, bereavement may coincide with the child going through additional upheaval and as such, he or she needs to be treated sensitively. Some awareness of the circumstances leading to the loss or separation can be helpful in this situation.

Many children become very attached to their pets, viewing them as a best friend and confidante, and perhaps as the only one who understands them. When that bond is broken, the child may feel sad and lonely. Feelings of numbness, disbelief and denial are common in children who lose a pet.

A child may also display anger in relation to losing their pet. This could be directed towards a veterinarian, for example, 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, but 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. Examples include loss of a family member, a 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 human relationships¹.

The child's age and their understanding of death and dying will also influence their response to pet loss. Any questions asked by children should be answered in a simple, honest and age-appropriate way. Inform childminders, teachers and others who care for your child, about the loss.



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 themselves die. Reassure the child that the pet's death was not due to anything they said or did. Try and maintain the routine you had with the pet and child for example maintain family walk time.
- **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', wet the bed or experience eating or sleeping problems. Encourage the child to share their feelings or express them through drawing or storytelling. Provide plenty of reassurance and be honest and clear.
- **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 and it's important to realise these are part of the grief response. They may become obsessed with death and develop anxiety as they feel the world has become unsafe and unpredictable. Plenty of reassurance must be provided. If appropriate, explain what euthanasia is and why it was necessary (see below). Again, euthanasia should not be referred to as 'putting to sleep'. Help the child express and explore their feelings without overwhelming them. Seek help from teachers or school counsellors if they are having trouble in class.
- **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. They may feel responsible for the death and dwell on how they could have prevented it. Be open to discussion and let them know that you are always there to listen. Be honest and give comfort and support where needed.

- **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. Let them know they are not alone in their grief, that you feel it too, and that it would be good to share feelings when they are ready.

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.



Discussing euthanasia, and decisions regarding burial and cremation

Depending on the age of the child, you may need to explain euthanasia in more detail. 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 'anaesthetics'. Such use of language could make the child fearful of falling asleep, or of having an anaesthetic.

When a veterinarian advises that a situation is, or could be, terminal it is best to share this information with your family. Children should be told sensitively that their time with their animal may be coming to an end. This allows children to spend valuable time with their pets and to begin to grieve. This anticipatory grief prevents what would be a more impactful shock if suddenly presented with news of their pet's death. Explain to children that their animal will not suffer, that veterinarians are trained to know when is the 'right time' to euthanase and that they gently help animals to die peacefully. Depending on the maturity of the child, discussion could take place about whether the animal will be buried or cremated, and whether the ashes will be returned.

Children may ask questions such as why animals' eyes remain open after death (muscles are required to close eyelids); why the body is stiff (rigor mortis is caused by changes in muscles); and why the body is cold (body gradually cools to room temperature following death). Your veterinarian could be requested to glue eyelids shut to make the pet look more peaceful. In discussion with your veterinarian it will be decided whether to perform euthanasia at home or at the veterinary practice. It is thought that it can be helpful for children to view the body after death.

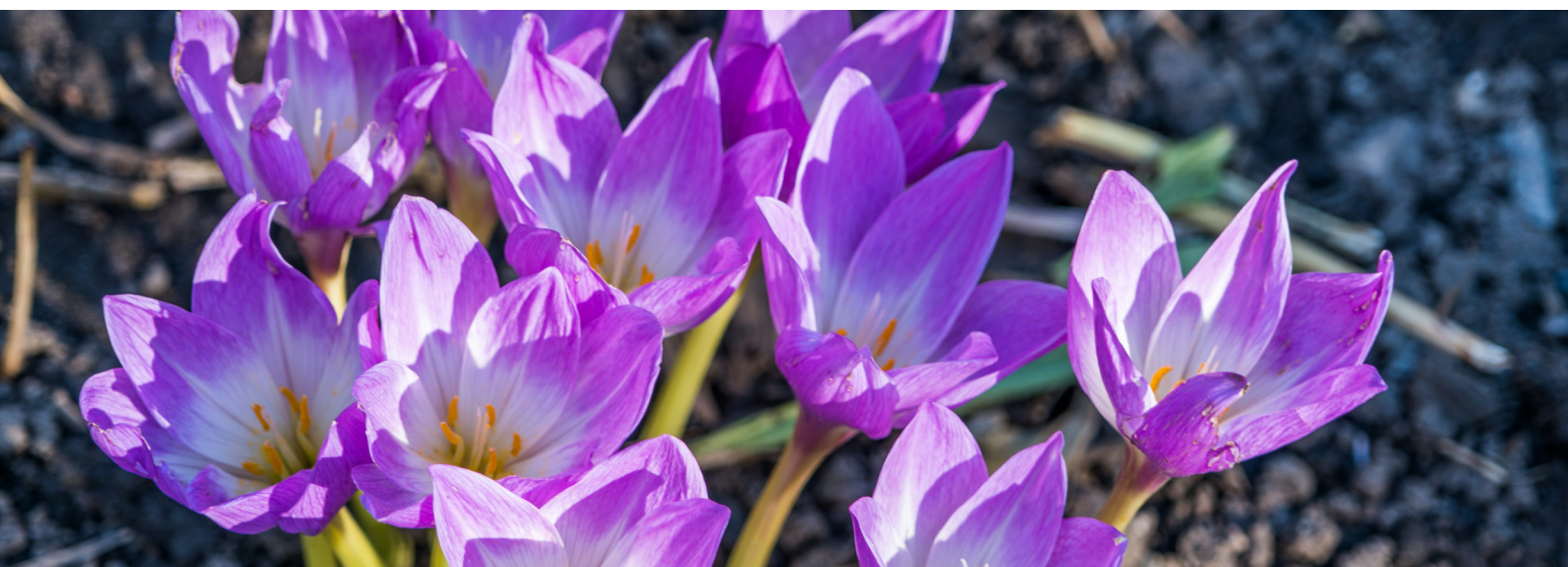
Where there is a garden, a family may choose to carry out a home burial (see below; there are strict rules about burying pets that must be observed). Children may wish to spend a little time talking to and grooming the animal, or other last acts of love before the pet is buried. Allowing other family pets to view the body may help them understand that their friend has died and may prevent distressing searching behaviours, which could otherwise last for weeks. If animals are to be cremated, children and other pets may be able to view the body at the surgery; or this could be taken home for a few hours before being returned to the surgery.

It is extremely helpful for children to receive a bereavement card from the veterinary practice, with a simple explanation of why their pet's illness became terminal. You can request your practice to send your children a bereavement card, explaining that the euthanasia was necessary. Advise them of the names and ages of your children so that cards are personalised and written in an age appropriate way.

Many children choose to bury their pet. They like the ritual, which helps to bring closure. Animals should be wrapped in natural fibre (for example, wool, cotton or silk) and buried about 2 feet deep in a well-drained area of the garden. Small pets, such as birds and rodents, can be buried in a cardboard box. Note that plastic and other non-biodegradable materials should not be used. Heavy stones or flagstones should be placed on the grave to thwart scavenging animals.

It is helpful to explain to children that the pet will nourish plants in the garden – they are still a part of nature and form part of the circle of life.

Note: There are a number of different rules and regulations around the burial and cremation of your pet and these differ across the UK and between local authorities. Please discuss this with your vet and see below for further reading².



Explaining pet death to a child

A child's bond with a companion animal can be very strong and it is 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, this will be particularly hard for the child.

Companion animals are much-loved members of our families and losing them can result in great heartache for all. As a parent or caregiver, it will fall to you to explain to your child that their pet has passed away, while at the same time dealing with your own grief. There may be difficult conversations, especially if the pet has been euthanised or the death was the result of a traumatic event. An anticipated loss can provide valuable time to prepare. Depending on their emotional maturity, every child will deal with grief differently. You will know your child best, but always remember the importance of being honest and do not be afraid if there are some questions you do not know the answer to.

If you have no specific religious beliefs/or do not believe in the concept of Heaven or an after life, you can always explain that the pet is no longer with the family in person, but that they will live on in your heart and through your memories forever.

Traumatic pet loss

Traumatic loss could result from the pet being involved in a road traffic accident, through domestic violence, 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 Hoff³ indicated that children who were kept with their dogs following parental separation had better long-term outcomes. A study by Hunt et al⁴ 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 suffer 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 who may have witnessed the harming or killing of their pet if they have come from an abusive home. Complex PTSD is often more severe if the trauma was 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.

Death or trauma to a pet that arises from domestic violence or coercive behaviour can cause long-term harm. For additional support on this contact the National Domestic Abuse Helpline on 0808 2000 247.

It is important to consider that when a child has a strong attachment to a pet, efforts should be made to keep them together if at all possible. At the very least, provision should be made for the child to stay in contact with the pet and/or visit it.

Remembering your pet

Finding ways to remember your pet and the relationship that the family enjoyed with them has been shown to facilitate the healing process. The following are examples of practical tasks that can help a child remember a lost pet.

- 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.

Adopting another pet

If parents or guardians are considering adopting another pet, consideration must be given to the timing. When a parent or guardian makes this suggestion, the child may feel that their grief is not understood at all. If the child raises the issue, talk it through with them and make sure they are not simply trying to 'replace' their lost friend to ease their pain. Animals cannot be replaced, as each is an individual. Adopting another animal before sufficient grief work has been carried out can complicate the grief process and may impair the development of a strong bond between the child and the new pet.

Adopting an animal of similar appearance to the deceased pet may also impair the bonding process. We must counsel against parents seeking to prevent their children learning about the death of an animal by finding a doppelganger or saying that the pet ran away or was rehomed to a farm. Avoidance of the truth may cause a deep breach of trust between the child and the parent, if the truth becomes known to the child. When a parent lies about such an important relationship, a child may question whether the parent can be trusted at all. Parents need to be honest about death – and supportive of their children in these circumstances.

If or when the time comes that a parent decides to get another pet, involve the child in choosing the new animal. We strongly suggest that parents or guardians undertake extensive research before adopting or buying an animal under any circumstances. For a good bond to be formed between a child and a new pet, careful matching of the animal's needs to the expectations of the family is required. Animals should be acquired from reputable sources and your veterinary practice team can provide excellent advice on the suitability of various species and how to source them.

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. Pets and after life body care:
Quietus Vets – <https://www.quietusvet.co.uk/bury-burial-dog-cat-uk>
Compassion Understood – <https://www.compassionunderstood.com/page/after-life-body-care>
3. 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.
4. 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