

When Fido Dies:

by
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Understanding Your Child's Grief

Our beloved golden retriever died suddenly of a massive coronary. His congenital heart defect had gone undiagnosed until an emergency trip to the animal hospital. Then his giant heart stopped and we were left shocked and grief-stricken.

At the time, our daughters, Abby and Josie, were four- and two-years-old respectively. When we received the news of Harley's death, my husband and I started sobbing uncontrollably. Abby was frightened by our anguish, almost to the point of panic. The only way to console her was for us to regain our composure.

When we were calmer, I told them that Mommy and Daddy were sad because Harley was dead and we would miss him. All Josie needed to know was that Harley had gone "bye-bye." Abby acted like she understood and even said, "Harley is dead and I miss him."

However, she was only parroting our expressions. I realized that she didn't really understand because she repeatedly asked, "When is Harley coming home?" I had to explain his death several times with an emphasis



on the fact that he was never coming home. As my frustration increased I wondered, "Why didn't she get it?"

Because she wasn't cognitively mature enough. As children grow physically, they likewise grow cognitively and their ability to grasp abstract concepts increases.

WHAT CHILDREN UNDERSTAND ABOUT DEATH

AGES 2-5

Pre-schoolers are not developmentally ready to understand death because their concept of time is not complete. They believe death is reversible. "So, if he hears that someone dies, he figures it's a temporary thing -- you die and then come back; it's like going out to the grocery store," wrote authors Dan Schaefer, Ph.D. and Christine Lyons in their book, "How Do We Tell the Children," (Newmarket Press, New York, 2001).

Because pre-schoolers lack the ability to comprehend the finality of death, they may seem callous and uncaring. When Cecile L. broke the news of the death of their dog to her four-year-old son, he asked, "Does that mean we can get a puppy?"

"I was actually hurt by his reaction," Cecile said.

According to Tim Schnabel, M.Ed. a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist specializing in grief therapy, her son's reaction was not uncommon.



"Even if they feel sadness, the emotion is often short-lived," he said.

AGES 6-9

Children in this age group begin to understand the permanence of death but they might not understand the universality of it. They may think of death as a monster that catches you or a disease that is contagious and therefore can be avoided. They may or may not understand their vulnerability to death. They may become overly curious about the biological details or want to know what happens to the body.

Kristen B. had to go into lengthy explanations to her six-year-old daughter about the cause of their dog's death. "I told her that Tessie died because she was old, but my daughter wanted to know why and I had to explain liver failure to her," Kristen recalled.

In "Guiding Your Child Through Grief," (Bantam Books, New York, 2000), authors Mary Ann Emswiler and James

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SUGGESTED READING

FOR AGES 2-5:

When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death, Laurie K. M. Brown; Little Brown & Co.; Boston, 1998.

The Dead Bird, Margaret Wise Brown; Harper Trophy; New York, 1995.

FOR AGES 6-9:

The Jester Has Lost His Jingle, David Saltzman; The Jester Company; Palos Verdes Estates, California, 1995.

Badger's Parting Gifts, Susan Varley; Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books; New York, 1984.

FOR AGES 10-12:

The Eyes of the Amaryllis, Natalie Babbitt; Farrar, Straus & Giroux; New York, 1986.

How it Feels When a Parent Dies, Jill Kremetz; Knopf; New York, 1981.

FOR TEENS:

Say Goodnight, Gracie, Julie R. Deaver; Harper Trophy; New York, 1989

Straight Talk about Death for Teenagers: How to Cope with Losing Someone You Love, Earl Grollman; Beacon Press; Boston, 1993.

FOR PARENTS:

Guiding Your Child Through Grief, Mary Ann Emswiler & James P. Emswiler; Bantam Books; New York, 2000.

How Do We Tell the Children, Dan Schaefer & Christine Lyons; Newmarket Press; New York, 2001.

P. Emswiler recommend that parents be as forthcoming as possible. "If no one answers your child's questions, he'll fill in the answers with his imagination."

AGES 10-12

According to Schnabel, pre-teens are the most vulnerable to extreme grief or depression following the death of a pet. Children in this age group have complete understanding of mortality and may become troubled about their own death.

"If they don't feel comfortable expressing their sadness or fear, it may come out as anger," Schnabel cautions. "When adults are willing to express sadness and put words to it, the children do much better. It helps the child learn how to express feelings."

Pre-teens might be interested in the biological details of death and are old enough to assimilate that information. They might also want to participate in formal ceremonies.

Paul Boyer, owner of Pet Plantation Funeral Home in Warner Robins,

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Georgia, has seen an increase in the popularity of memorial services for pets in the last five years. Families usually bring their children to the funeral home and include them in the ceremony, which Boyer advocated. "Seeing the pet in a private viewing room and seeing the crematorium helps them understand the process and gives them a chance to say good-bye," Boyer said.

TEENAGERS

Children in their teens understand death as well as an adult but they might be struggling with philosophical questions such as, "Why do bad things happen?"

Schaefer and Lyons encourage parents to be available to help their children understand their intense emotions and to teach them how to act. "They are probably concerned about where they fit in at this time, what they're expected to do, and how to handle the myriad emotions that are brewing inside them," they wrote.

Because teenagers are very likely to have grown up with the pet, they might have been very attached to it. It's

important to respect their grief. "The harshest thing anyone could say is, 'What, you're still sad about the dog? It's just a dog. You can get another one.'" Schnabel said.

Pets teach children many valuable lessons that prepare them for life. They learn responsibility, sensitivity, and how to give and receive unconditional love. Pets can also help children learn about death.

Lynette S. and her family were faced with the difficult decision of euthanasia for their elderly cat that was ill with cancer. Her 12-year-old daughter wanted to wait but Lynette explained to her the pain and suffering their cat was experiencing. "I told her that being a responsible pet owner means doing what is best, even when it hurts," Lynette said. Her daughter finally agreed and learned an important lesson in selfless compassion.

"When the death of a pet is handled well, it sets the stage for a solid foundation for future encounters with loss," Schnabel said.

Harley's death was not the first time I had shed tears for a pet, but it was the first time as a parent. In addition to my sadness, I realized I had the responsibility to help my children through the grieving process. While Abby and Josie were too young to fully grasp the meaning of his death, the experience helped prepare us for other periods of mourning.

HELPFUL WEBSITES

www.aplb.org

Association of Pet Loss and Bereavement

www.pet-loss.net

Support information plus state by state listing of pet mortuaries and grief counselors

www.paws2heaven.com

State by state listing of pet mortuaries and grief counselors as well as sells memorial items.