



## Grief Support Resources

ASPCA Pet Loss Support Hotline – (877) 474-3310

Cornell University Pet Loss Support Hotline – (607) 253-3932

Tufts University Pet Loss Support Hotline – (508) 839-7966

Lap of Love Pet Loss and Bereavement Hotline – (855) 352-5683

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - (800) 273-8255

Crisis Textline – [www.crisistextline.org](http://www.crisistextline.org)

West Michigan Pet Loss Support Group: Ginny Mikita, facilitator – (see flyer) meets at the Heaven at Home office, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tuesday of each month

Day by Day Pet Caregiver Support – <http://daybydaypetsupport.com>

Supporting pet families from the time of the pet's diagnosis through treatment, end-of-life decision-making, and coping after the loss of a beloved pet. They provide hope, education, resources, and on-going support in an atmosphere of empathy and understanding.

\*Moderated live online chat available Sundays and Tuesdays 8pm EST, and Thursdays at 7pm EST (click on Chat Room)

The Argus Institute – <https://csu-cvmb.colostate.edu/vth/diagnostic-and-support/argus>  
End of life support for pet parents

Ohio State University Vet School, Honoring the Bond – <https://vet.osu.edu>  
Resources for end of life care, quality of life, and grief support

The Association of Pet Loss and Bereavement - [www.aplb.org](http://www.aplb.org)  
Moderated online chat rooms for pet loss and anticipatory grief as well as other helpful online resources

Veterinary Wisdom for Pet Parents – [www.veterinarywisdomforpetparents.com](http://www.veterinarywisdomforpetparents.com)

Rainbow Bridge pet memorials – [www.rainbowsbridge.com](http://www.rainbowsbridge.com)

Pet Loss Grief Support, Rainbow Bridge & Candle Ceremony – [www.petloss.com](http://www.petloss.com)





## Ways to Memorialize your pet



- ◆ The Living Urn - a bio urn and planting system designed to grow a beautiful, enduring memory tree, plant or flowers with cremated remains ([www.thelivingurn.com](http://www.thelivingurn.com))
- ◆ Cuddle Clones - hand designed plush animals made to capture everything that made your pet unique ([www.cuddleclones.com](http://www.cuddleclones.com))
- ◆ Silver Pet Prints - Sterling Silver jewelry made using your pet's actual paw print ([us.silverpetprints.com](http://us.silverpetprints.com))
- ◆ Sacred Embers Cremation Art & Jewelry - have a memorial piece created with the ashes of your loved one ([www.sacredembers.com](http://www.sacredembers.com))
- ◆ Go to our website and submit a tribute, with favorite photos, to your pet: [www.pethospicevet.com](http://www.pethospicevet.com) - click on Memorialize Your Pet
- ◆ Make a donation in your pet's name or donate your time to an animal-related organization or charity
- ◆ Attach your pet's collar to their food or water bowl and use it as a planter
- ◆ Plant a tree, bush, or special flowers over or near where you have buried your pet or scattered their ashes
- ◆ Keep whiskers or a clipping of fur in a locket or pouch or even a picture frame
- ◆ Create an "inspiration station" - make a shelf, corner, or shadow box to fill with things that you loved about your furry friend - photos, artwork, collars, tags, toys - anything that touches your heart and brings a smile when you see it
- ◆ Observe National Pet Memorial Day - This holiday is on the second sunday of September. Have a small ceremony, light a candle, take a memory walk, or just share stories and memories





## **Books to help cope with the loss of a pet**

### **Goodbye Friend, Healing Wisdom for Anyone Who has Ever Lost a Pet**

by Gary Kowalski

*From the moment pets come into our lives, we know the day will arrive when we have to say farewell. Filled with heartwarming stories and practical guidance on such matters as taking care of yourself while mourning, creating rituals to honor your pet's memory, and talking to children about death.*

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by Allen and Linda Anderson

*In this thoughtful book Allen and Linda Anderson walk you through the numbing pain and dreadful sense of loss that arise when a beloved animal dies. They offer solace to help you deal with grief, remember and honor key moments in the animal's life, find comfort through groups and with professionals, and get past the depression. They also include exercises, affirmation, and meditations to use through the various stages of grief. The Andersons' caring, practical advice covers all aspects of pet loss.*

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*Author Julie Reck is a veterinarian who has devoted her professional career to helping owners make more informed decisions about euthanasia. In Facing Farewell, readers are provided with a complete description of the euthanasia procedure so that we know what to expect and can feel confident that we have made the right choice for both ourselves and our pet.*

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by Gene Weingarten with photographs by Michael S Williamson

*This glorious book documents the unique appeal of man's best friend in his or her last, and best, years with lovely black and white photographs and narration. A fitting tribute to the dogs we can never forget.*

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The following is information from Kathryn Jennings, Executive Director of the International Association for Animal Hospice and Palliative Care (IAAHPC). We at *Heaven at Home* thought this might be helpful for your family as you work through this difficult time.

### **Helping children cope**

- Be straightforward and honest in all instances
- Don't hide your pet's condition from children
- Include them in caregiving
- Discuss all treatment and end of life options together
- Avoid decisions made in haste

### **Preparing kids for euthanasia**

- Create an environment where it's safe to ask questions
- Emphasize that euthanasia is a loving act of courage
- Explain that natural death can be painful and cause suffering
- Help them understand the "need" for euthanasia when there are no other options
- Educate them about the process – before, during, and after
- Avoid the phrase "put to sleep" or "put down"
- Younger children require a clearer explanation in order to understand the finality
- Explain that the pet will die peacefully without feeling hurt or scared

### **Should children be present or not?**

- You, as the parent, know your child best
- Recommended age is 10 and older
- Whether they are present or not, allow them to view the body afterwards
- Final goodbye can help kids to accept the reality

### **How can I support my child through his or her grief?**

- Grief cannot be fixed or analyzed, it must be felt to be healed. Children need someone to be present with them while they are experiencing the pain of grief as they mourn
- Provide an environment that allows your child to feel and talk about the grief
- Communication should be open, honest, and ongoing
- Experience it together
- Assure them they are not responsible for the pet's death
- The realization that death is permanent does not happen until around the age of 8
- Encourage the expression of feelings verbally and/or through art
- Know that children have a natural ability to “dose” themselves with grief and are able to take a break from it when needed. (They can do this much better than adults.)

### **How to discuss aftercare**

- Avoid talking about burning or fire with respect to cremation
- Cremation can be described as “returning to ashes”
- Make it clear the pet is not hurt in the process
- With respect to burial, describe how the pet will be placed in a box and laid to rest in the ground where he will be safe

### **Honoring a pet's life**

- Rituals can help in acknowledging and accepting the loss, which is the path to healing
- Make a tribute table
- Design a gravestone
- Assemble a scrapbook or collage
- Write a poem or story
- Plant a tree
- Make a donation in the pet's name
- Volunteer at the animal shelter or Humane Society
- Just share stories and memories!

### **When/if to adopt again**

- Involve the whole family; everyone needs to be in agreement
- Adopting too quickly may delay mourning
- Children may take longer to move through grief



## Books to help children cope with the loss of a pet

### **When a Pet Dies** by Fred Rogers

*Mr. Rogers helps children share feelings of the loss of a pet while offering reassurance that grieving is a natural, healing thing to do. A sensitive and sensible first book about death.*

### **Dog Heaven** and **Cat Heaven** by Cynthia Rylant

*The words and illustrations for both books are comforting and uplifting, capturing the familiar habits of each furry friend. A book you can give to children and adults. While terms 'God' and 'Heaven' are used throughout, the book does not have a religious message.*

### **A Special Place for Charlee** by Debby Morehead

*Appropriate for all ages, but is most effective to help pre-school and school-aged children with pet loss. Covers learning bad news, euthanasia, and coping with grief.*

### **The Dragonfly Door** by John Adams

*This book, about two insect friends, is a beautiful allegory for death and is very gently told. It offers an optimistic concept of where the deceased "goes" after death.*

### **Sammy in the Sky** by Barbara Walsh

*This is a beautiful book about more than just goodbyes, but also of celebrating love and memories.*

### **When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death** by Laurie Krasny

*This forthright book serves as a kid-friendly guide to death and dealing with the loss of a loved one. With Dinosaurs as the characters, it talks about what being alive and what dying means, along with the feelings people may experience when someone they know dies. This book may be most helpful to read before a death, but can also help answer questions kids often have, such as why we have funerals and how death is different than sleep.*

### **Saying Goodbye to Lulu** by Corinne Demas

*This is an excellent story for parents to read to their children even before a pet is elderly or gone, as it can facilitate a discussion about how pets change and age. It can also help children find ways to tell their own story and verbalize their experiences.*



## Books Suitable for Teens

### **A Snowflake in my Hand** by Samantha Mooney

*A joyous celebration of the bond between animals and people, centered around stories of cats who were patients at the Animal Medical Center in New York City. A “celebration of life in the face of death.”*

### **Mostly Bob** by Tom Corwin

*A letter written as a tribute to Bob, the author’s golden retriever who passed away unexpectedly. It tells Bob’s story of the possibility of change and the transformational power of love.*

### **Deconstruction/Reconstruction: A Grief Journal for Teens**

created by The Dougy Center

*The Dougy Center designed this journal specifically for teenagers. It guides teens through prompts and activities that help them process their loss and grief. It’s an “advice-free place where teens can draw, write, paint, and transform whatever they are thinking and feeling”.*

### **Healing a Teen’s Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas for Families, Friends, and Caregivers** by Dr Alan Wolfelt

*This book provides 100 practical ideas for parents or other caregivers to help teens process the death of a loved one and cope with the grief they are feeling.*

### **Healing Your Grieving Heart ‘For Teens’: 100 Practical Ideas** by Dr Alan Wolfelt

*This book provides 100 practical ideas for teens who are mourning a loss. The writing is directed to teens and contains relevant, useful tips on how to express oneself, how to cope with friends or at school, how to heal and more.*

### **Paw Prints in the Stars** by Warren Hanson

*Created to help one deal with the loss of a beloved pet, this book is written in the voice of the pet that has passed and brings peace and comfort while celebrating life. There is a place for treasured photos and journal pages for favorite memories as well as a special ribbon to hold collar tags.*



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# Helping Children Cope with the Serious Illness or Death of a Companion Animal

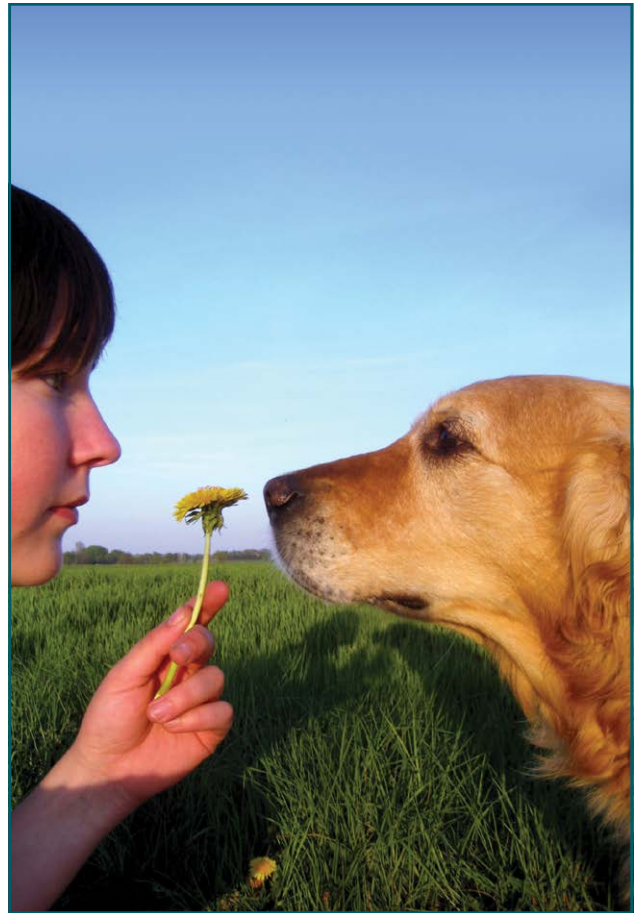
## Should Children be Informed?

**YES!** Learning to accept illness, injury, or death is a natural experience in life. It is important that children have the opportunity to participate in family discussions of these issues. Being involved in the decision-making and treatment process of a family pet that is seriously ill or injured may provide valuable lessons for children about responsibility, compassion, commitment and coping.

**WHY?** When a companion animal is ill, parents often try to hide worry and anxiety from their children. This protection philosophy can backfire. If children do not find out the information they need from you, they may seek other, less reliable, sources of support. Each time a child inquires and is denied adequate information, they delve into their own imagination or memory to create an answer. The longer such misinformation exists, the more difficult it is to correct. Because of the anxiety and fear created by not talking with children about serious issues that impact the family, children may experience adverse emotional reactions. They may become angry, hoping that their tantrums will restore normality. They may neglect playing and eating because of guilt—not realizing that their own actions had nothing to do with the illness, injury, or death of their companion animal. Involving children throughout the process will most likely alleviate fears and anxieties.

**HOW?** Each child is a unique individual and your discussions will be based on a variety of factors, including age, development, personality, religion, and culture. Offer explanations or answer questions at the most basic level appropriate for your child. Let your child guide you with additional questions. The well-being of your child should be the main focus. Your child may be consulted and encouraged to participate in decision making, but never forced.

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The Ohio State University  
Veterinary Medical Center - **Dublin**  
5020 Bradenton Avenue  
Dublin, OH 43017  
(614) 889-8070

## Developmental Stages and Grief

The following serve as general guidelines for the grieving process of children. Many children develop differently and you will need to follow your child's lead.\*

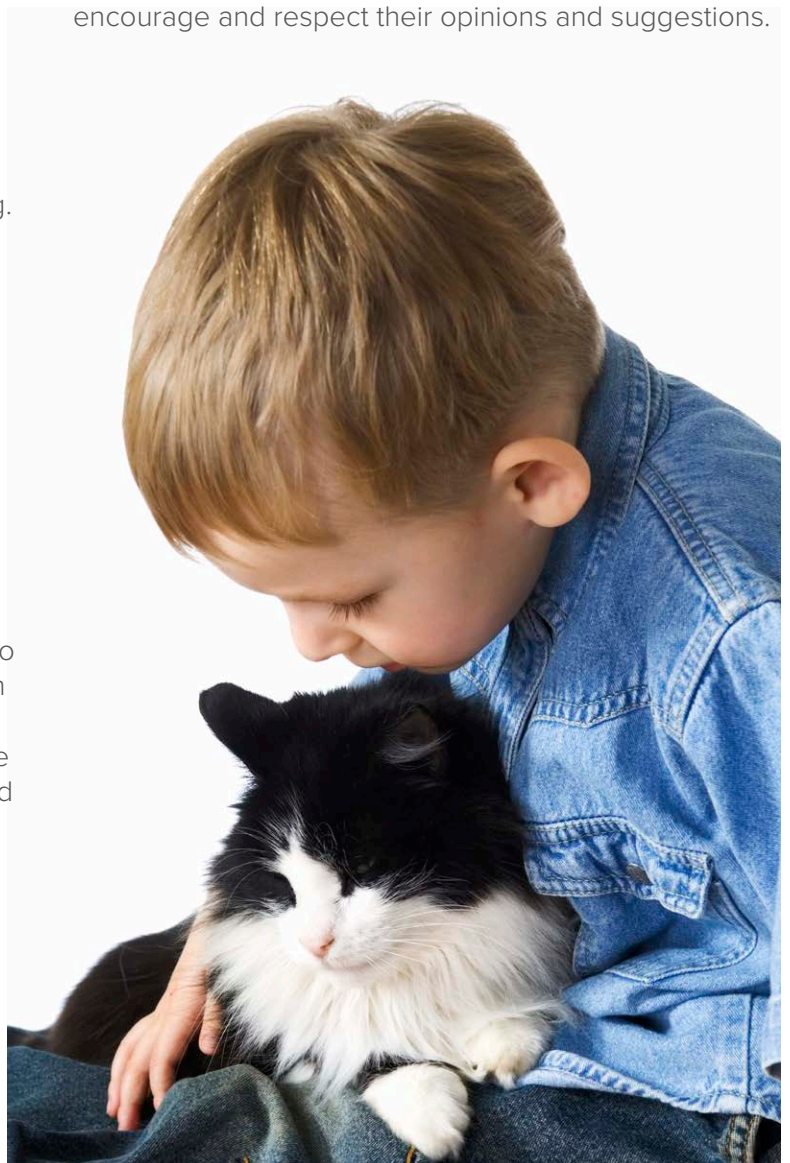
**Infants and Toddlers:** Can and do grieve. To them, the death of someone close can be an issue of separation and abandonment. They may experience sleep disturbances, regressive behavior, or explosive emotions. Use a reassuring, loving voice and gestures to show your child that someone is there to love and care for them.

**Ages 3-5:** Do not understand that death is final. They know their pet is gone but they believe it is a temporary situation. Preschoolers need reassurance that someone is there to take care of them and that they are secure. Give simple and direct answers to questions about the death. Read to the child from an age-appropriate book about loss. Encourage the expression of feelings through play, talking, or drawing.

**Ages 5-8:** Understand that death is final, but they have difficulty imagining it on a personal level. They may visualize death as an angel, skeleton, or monster. Expect questions about the physical aspects of death, and don't be surprised if a child in this age group expresses anger at the pet for leaving them. Answer questions directly. Let them know that their pet loved them and that it's okay to feel angry, or any other emotion.

**Ages 9-12:** Understand that death is final, personal, and something that happens to everyone. Expect children in this age range to ask many questions and to have an almost morbid curiosity about death. Although they may appear to be coping well, preteens tend to keep many of their feelings hidden. Give them the time and opportunity to talk, share, express themselves, and ask questions.

**Ages 13-16:** Because adolescents may not verbally express the intensity of their emotions, they are often mistakenly judged by their behavioral reactions to grief. Adolescents may attempt to mask their emotions from all but their closest friends. Although persons in this age group may refrain from emotions or expressions, clinical studies show that teenagers often have more intense grief than any other age group. Because they want to think of themselves as adults, it is important to encourage and respect their opinions and suggestions.



\*Adapted with permission of the Bereavement Committee, University of Virginia Health System, and the Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia.

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## How to Help Your Child

### **Be honest.**

Using deception, no matter how well intended, is never recommended. It will be difficult to regain the trust of your child if they ever discover that you distorted the truth or lied to them. Prepare children ahead of time for what to expect. Hold a family meeting and discuss the veterinarian's diagnosis, the pet's prognosis, and the cost of treatments and care, including side effects and the pet's quality of life. If available and willing, you may want to consider enlisting the help of your veterinarian in having these discussions with your children.



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### **Show emotions.**

Respect and encourage your child's need to express and share feelings of sadness. Let them see you upset and crying. By talking about sad feelings and crying, children learn that these emotions and behaviors are acceptable and appropriate. Don't feel as if you must have all the answers; sometimes just listening is enough. Expect that young children will ask and need answers to the same questions over and over again. Don't inadvertently cut off their feelings by noting how well your children are handling their grief or how brave or strong they are. Explain that it is the pet's death that makes you sad; otherwise they may worry that they are to blame.

### **Let children express grief in their own way.**

Children often react to death with outbursts of laughter, aggressiveness, hostility, boisterous activity, or in some other manner that may be unacceptable by adult standards. Be patient and supportive. Recognize that children grieve differently than adults and should not be punished because adults do not understand their reactions. Do not reward inappropriate behavior, however. Try to keep the child's routines as normal as possible. Behavior deemed inappropriate may be positively redirected by role-modeling acceptable alternatives for the child. (Although these reactions are quite normal, prolonged adverse reactions may indicate a need for the support of a professionally trained grief counselor.)

### **Respect the feelings of other family members.**

Recognize that not everyone in the family is equally attached to the pet and that not everyone shows their feelings or grieves in the same way.

### **Inform others of what's going on in your children's lives.**

Ask neighbors, teachers, relatives, and friends for extra support and understanding of your children right now, and for help in keeping a watchful eye on them at this sad and difficult time.

## Understanding Euthanasia

### **Include children in the euthanasia decision.**

Children need help to understand why the decision has to be made and a feeling that they've participated in making it. They also need an opportunity to say good-bye and make the most of whatever time they may have left with their pet.

### **If at all possible, do not plan to euthanize a companion animal while a child is away from home.**

If this cannot be prevented for medical reasons, be honest. Do not say that the companion animal ran away from home (unless this is the truth).

### **Help young children understand why euthanasia is necessary, in words they can understand.**

Old age: "When animals get very old, their bodies wear out and stop working."

Terminal illness: "Because the disease couldn't be stopped, our pet is very sick. His body has worn out and stopped working."

An accident: "A terrible thing happened (hit by car etc.). Our pet's body was badly hurt and couldn't be fixed. It stopped working."

### **Explain euthanasia in a developmentally appropriate way.**

Explain that the pet will be helped to die peacefully and without pain.

"We will be taking Fluffy to the veterinarian to help her die. Dr. Smith will give Fluffy a shot filled with medicine that only works on animals. The shot will stop Fluffy's heart. When her heart stops, she won't be able to breathe on her own. She will not feel any pain."

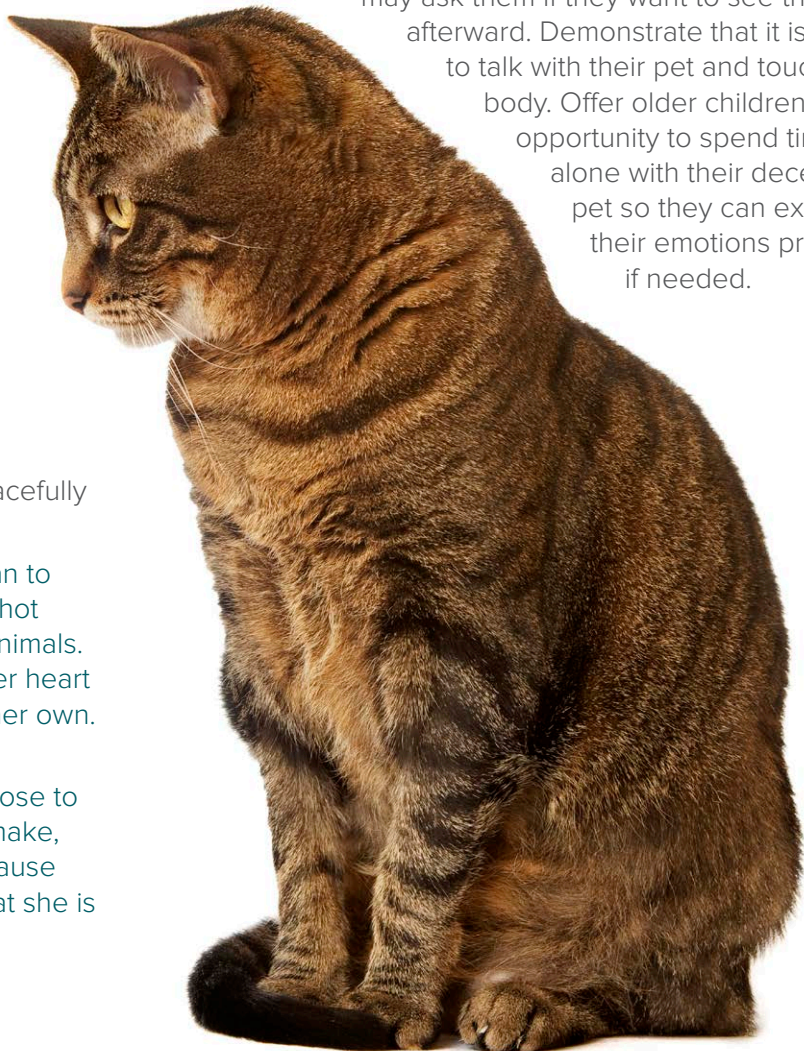
"When an animal is suffering, we can choose to help them die. It's a very sad choice to make, but one that we want to think about because we love Snowball so much. We know that she is very sick and will die."

### **Avoid the common phrase for euthanasia, "put to sleep."**

Since we go to sleep nightly, associating this act with death creates anxiety and might lead to disruptions in sleeping routines or behaviors. (It can also cause fear over surgery and anesthesia.)

### **Allow the child to be present for the pet's euthanasia, if they choose.**

Let them know you will support their decision. The reality of a peaceful death is less traumatic to children than their fantasy of it. Young children may not understand the permanence of death unless they actually see that their pet is not "just asleep." If your child is not present for the euthanasia, you may ask them if they want to see their pet afterward. Demonstrate that it is OK to talk with their pet and touch its body. Offer older children an opportunity to spend time alone with their deceased pet so they can express their emotions privately, if needed.



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## Explaining Death

Properly explaining death can help to demystify the concept as well as alleviate possible guilt. Explaining death to children can help to alleviate their fears or misconceptions. Children often wonder if the death could have been prevented or if the same thing might happen to them. Children also may wonder if they caused the death by something they said or thought. Make sure the child does not feel at fault—that they understand that their thoughts, feelings or words did not cause the death.

“It’s okay if you got mad at Socks. Your thoughts didn’t hurt him.”

### Be simple and concrete.

Use words such as “died” or “is dead.” Explain that every living thing can get sick or be hurt and that no living thing lives forever.

“Joey was very sick and his heart stopped beating.”

“Fluffy’s body stopped working.”

“You had nothing to do with Skippy’s death. He was very sick and his lungs and heart no longer worked.”

“At some point, all animals die.”

“Many animals have shorter lives than we do. They don’t live as long as people.”

### Avoid euphemisms.

Children are very literal and may become confused when adults use other terms for death such as “passed away,” “gone to sleep,” “moved on to a better place,” “left us,” or “gone on.” Such phrases might cause children to feel rejected or abandoned, or imply the companion animal may return, or encourage children to go searching for the lost companion animal.

### Avoid telling children that their pet was so good or so special that God wants it to be with Him in heaven.

Children interpret information literally and may become angry with God or fear that they (or you) will be chosen next.

### Don’t blame the veterinarian.

Your children may develop fear of veterinarians and other health care givers.

## What Happens Next?

### Explain what will happen to the pet’s remains.

If you plan to have your pet cremated, explain that your pet will be taken to a pet crematory, a place where the pet’s body will be turned into ashes. Then your family will take those ashes and (scatter them, bury them in the backyard, keep them in an urn, etc.). The use of words “fire” or “burn” can be scary to children. Be sure to explain that the pet cannot feel any pain. If you plan on burying your pet, explain that your pet will be sealed in a box or casket and put in the ground.

“Fluffy’s body will be put in a room that gets very, very hot. This will turn his body to ashes, which looks a little bit like sand.”

“We wanted to cremate Fluffy so we could always have a way to remember him. We will keep his ashes in an urn, at our house. We can always take his ashes with us if we ever move.”

“We are going to bury Fluffy in the ground.”

### Plan a memorial ritual.

Decide how you’ll honor your pet’s life and keep its memory alive. Emphasis should be placed on the happy experiences that were shared with the deceased companion animal. Let children honor their companion animal in their own way. Encourage activities to help your children experience and express their love and grief (drawing or painting pictures, compiling an album, scrapbook or memory box, viewing videos or home movies, writing or sharing memories, planting a shrub or tree, reading books on pet loss).

“What is your favorite memory of Princess?”

“Snowball knows you loved her.”

“It’s okay to laugh and have fun as soon as you feel like it.”

“How about writing a letter or a story, or drawing a picture about the way you feel?”

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## What Happens Next?

**Don't immediately get a new pet in an effort to "replace" this one.**

During this process, it is important to not rush into a decision to adopt a new companion animal to take away the pain of grief. Getting a new pet too soon may imply to children that their grief is unimportant and unnecessary. It might imply that everything is replaceable, including the children themselves. The lesson children can learn through grief is that because relationships are special and unique, they are not replaceable. They also may react with anger or guilt, reject the new pet, and/or feel disloyal to the one who died.

"It's ok to not want a new pet."

"It's ok to want a new pet."



## The Honoring the Bond program at The Ohio State University Veterinary Medical Center

The mission of the Honoring the Bond program is to recognize and honor the human-animal bond by providing support to companion animal owners. Honoring the Bond program services are available, at no cost, to clients of the Ohio State Veterinary Medical Center.

Our social workers can assist in the following ways:

- Act as a liaison between the companion animal owner and veterinary medical team
- Provide crisis intervention during difficult situations
- Assist in processing difficult decisions (quality of life assessments, treatment decisions)
- Be present before, during, and/or after euthanasia
- Facilitate family discussions with children
- Provide assessment and referral for further follow-up counseling, if needed
- Provide resources, including reading lists, websites, counselor and pet loss support group referrals, cremation/burial resources, memorial ideas, etc.

If you would like to speak with someone from the Honoring the Bond program, you may:

- Ask your clinician, student, or client services representative to contact us
- Contact us directly at (614) 247-8607
- Access our website and email at: [vet.osu.edu/honoringthebond](http://vet.osu.edu/honoringthebond)

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