

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH A PET'S EUTHANASIA

Choosing to euthanize a cherished companion animal is difficult enough for adults who are faced with such a horrible decision. What's even harder for many parents is finding a way to help their children understand and accept the fact that the time has come to help the pet to die.

Trying to overprotect their children from grief, parents may make the mistake of overlooking, minimizing or avoiding altogether the pain caused by the death of a family pet. Sadly, in so doing they will have missed a valuable opportunity to teach their children a very powerful lesson in coping with the painful reality of death.

The relationship between children and their pets is unique and irreplaceable. Pet loss can be very traumatic to a child, depending on the important role the pet played in the child's life: companion, friend, admirer, playmate, defender, love object, sibling, confidante. When that bond is broken, the pain can be deep and enduring, and the trauma can result in feelings of insecurity, anxiety, anger, guilt, helplessness, distrust and fear.

Yet it doesn't have to be that way. Children can be helped to cope effectively with this very difficult life experience-provided that we consider what the pet means to the child, take into account the child's developmental understanding of death, and carefully plan how the pet's euthanasia is presented and conducted.

Here are some suggestions for helping children cope with the euthanasia of a pet:

- *Be open and honest.* If the pet is terminally ill, death is pending and euthanasia is necessary, tell your children as soon as possible so they will hear it first from you and not from someone else. If they ever discover that you distorted the truth or lied to them, they'll have a great deal of trouble trusting you again.

- *Offer basic, age-appropriate explanations, and be available for questions.* Children need to know:
 - That grief is normal and necessary, and it's all right to feel sad : "This is how we feel when someone we love dies."
 - That it is the pet's death (not something your children did or failed to do) that makes you sad: "Mommy and Daddy are very sad because . . ."
 - What "dead" means: "The animal's body stops working and won't work anymore."
 - That death is not the same as sleeping: "When we sleep our body is still working, just resting." Avoid the common phrase for euthanasia, "put to sleep" as it can trigger sleep problems or intense anxiety over surgery and anesthesia. Better to say the pet will be helped to die peacefully and without pain.
 - That the pet has not "passed away", "left us" or "gone on". Such phrases imply the pet is on a trip and will return, leave children feeling rejected or abandoned, or encourage them to go searching for the lost pet or hold out hope for its return.
- *Help young children understand why euthanasia is necessary:* Explain that their pet may be suffering from:
 - Old age: "When an animal gets very, very, very old, his body wears out and stops working."
 - Terminal illness: "Because the disease couldn't be stopped, our pet is very, very sick; his body has worn out and has stopped working."
 - An accident: "A terrible thing happened (hit by a car, etc.); our pet's body was badly hurt and couldn't be fixed. It stopped working."
- *Avoid telling children that their pet was so good or so special that God wants it to be with Him in heaven.* Children may become angry

with God or fear that they (or you) will be chosen next.

- *Don't blame the veterinarian.* As a result your children may develop fear of veterinarians and other health care givers.
- *Include children in the euthanasia decision.* Never euthanize a family pet without telling your children first, even if they're away from home. Children need help in understanding 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 the pet.
- *Prepare children ahead of time as to 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. Schedule a visit to the veterinarian's office to learn about the euthanasia procedure itself and answer any questions you or your children may have. (Find out in advance how it will be done and where; how long it takes; if the pet will feel any pain; whether the family can be present; what will be done with the pet's remains afterward.)
- *Encourage children's involvement in the pet's euthanasia.* Let them be present during the procedure if they so choose. The reality of a peaceful death is far less traumatic to children than their terrible fantasy of it. Encourage children to see their pet after death, which reinforces the reality and removes the mystery and fear of death.
- *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.).
- *Plan a memorial ritual.* Decide in advance what you will do with your pet's remains, how you'll honor your pet's life and keep its memory alive. 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).

- *Respect and encourage your children's needs to express and share feelings of sadness.* When you bring up the subject, you're showing your own willingness to talk about it. When in doubt about your children's thoughts and feelings, ask. 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 cut off their feelings by noting how well your children are handling their grief or how brave or strong they are. Let them see you upset and crying, which implies that it's all right to cry for those we love and lose.
- *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.
- *Don't get a new pet in an effort to replace this one.* Getting a new pet too soon may imply to children that their grief is unimportant and unnecessary since everything is replaceable anyway (including the children themselves). They also may react with anger and guilt, rejecting the new pet and feeling disloyal to the one who died.
- *Inform others of what's going on in your children's life.* 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.