

GRIEF MANAGEMENT IN CHILDREN

The death of a cherished pet creates a sense of loss for adults and produces a predictable chain of emotions. The stages of grief are typically denial, sadness, depression, guilt, anger, and, finally, relief (or recovery). However, the effects on children vary widely depending upon the child's age and maturity level. The basis for their reaction is their ability to understand death.

Two and Three Year Olds

Children who are two or three years old typically have no understanding of death. They often consider it a form of sleep. They should be told that their pet has died and will not return. Common reactions to this include temporary loss of speech and generalised distress. The two or three year old should be reassured that the pet's failure to return is unrelated to anything the child may have said or done. Typically, a child in this age range will readily accept another pet in place of the dead one.

Four, Five, and Six Year Olds

Children in this age range have some understanding of death but in a way that relates to a continued existence. The pet may be considered to be living underground while continuing to eat, breathe, and play. Alternatively, it may be considered asleep. A return to life may be expected if the child views death as temporary. These children often feel that any anger they had for the pet may be responsible for its death. This view should be refuted because they may also translate this belief to the death of family members in the past. Some children also see death as contagious and begin to fear that their own death (or that of others) is imminent. They should be reassured that their death is not likely. Manifestations of grief often take the form of disturbances in bladder and bowel control, eating, and sleeping. This is best managed by parent-child discussions that allow the child to express feelings and concerns. Several brief discussions are generally more productive than one or two prolonged sessions.

Seven, Eight, and Nine Year Olds

The irreversibility of death becomes real to these children. They usually do not personalise death, thinking it cannot happen to themselves. However, some children may develop concerns about death of their parents. They may become very curious about death and its implications. Parents should be ready to respond frankly and honestly to questions that may arise. Several manifestations of grief may occur in these children, including the development of school problems, learning problems, antisocial attentiveness, or clinging may be seen. Based on grief reactions to loss of parents or siblings, it is likely that the symptoms may not occur immediately but several weeks or months later.

Ten and Eleven Year Olds

Children in this age range generally understand death as natural, inevitable, and universal. Consequently, these children often react to death in a manner very similar to adults.

Adolescents

Although this age group also reacts similarly to adults, many adolescents may exhibit various forms of denial. This usually takes the form of a lack of emotional display. Consequently, these young people may be experiencing sincere grief without any outward manifestations.

It is often helpful to perform a small ceremony on behalf of the deceased pet. This may centre about a home burial or distribution of the animal's ashes or may simply be the planting of a tree in the pet's honour. The ceremony gives the child (and adult) an opportunity to express and deal with their grief.

If you or your child are finding the grieving process difficult, perhaps a phone call to a counsellor may help. Sydney-based David Foote is a veterinarian who has also trained in bereavement counselling and is happy to arrange a phone consultation with you. He can be contacted at <http://www.davidfoote.com.au/> or on 0425 281 424