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Helping Children Through *Pet Loss*

Honest words. Safe feelings. Shared grief.

Losing a pet is often a child's first experience with death.

Pets are not "just animals" to children. They can be:

- A best friend
- A sibling
- A confidante
- A source of stability
- A daily companion

Children are often the forgotten grievers. Their grief deserves attention, validation, and guidance.

START WITH THIS: YOU'RE GRIEVING TOO	Before supporting your child, acknowledge your own grief. It is okay for your child to see that you are sad. You do not need to be stone-faced or emotionless. Staying functional and grounded is helpful. Pretending you don't hurt is not. When children see adults grieve in healthy ways, they learn that grief is an emotional experience, that it's okay to grieve, and that it'll be okay. Modeling this creates long-term emotional resilience.
BE HONEST AND USE CLEAR WORDS	Children need clear language. Avoid euphemisms like: • "We lost him." • "She went to sleep." • "God wanted him." Young children can interpret these literally and it may create confusion or fear. Instead, use simple, direct explanations:

- "Her body stopped working."
- "He died, which means he isn't alive anymore and won't be coming back."

If euthanasia is part of the conversation, you can explain: "The veterinarian gave medicine that made her heart stop beating in a peaceful way so she wouldn't hurt anymore."

Clear language builds safety.

MEET KIDS WHERE THEY ARE

Children understand death differently depending on age.

Birth–2 years

- Sense stress in the environment
- Crying, clinging, sleep disruption
- **Reassure with touch, holding, and soothing voice.**

Ages 2–5

- Do not understand permanence
- May repeatedly ask when the pet is coming back
- Tantrums, regressions, nightmares
- **Help them express feelings through play and drawing.**

Ages 6–11

- Understand death is final
- May think it was their fault
- May feel anger at the pet for dying
- **Reinforce clearly: This was not your fault.**

Ages 12–18

- Ask philosophical questions
- Mood swings, peer sensitivity
- May appear detached but feel deeply
- **Offer open communication and validation.**

WHAT TO SAY AND WHAT TO AVOID

Do say:

- "I'm sorry."
- "How are you feeling?"
- "I care about you."
- "I don't know what to say."
- "Do you remember when…"

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Avoid saying:

- "At least you have other pets."
- "You can get another one."
- "Don't cry."
- "You have to be strong."
- "I know exactly how you feel."

Children don't need platitudes. They need presence.

LET THEM PARTICIPATE

Children often benefit from having choices:

- Whether they want to say goodbye
- Whether they want to be present (when appropriate)
- How they want to remember their pet

Memorial ideas can include:

- Writing letters
- Drawing pictures
- Creating a scrapbook
- Planting flowers
- Holding a small ceremony
- Making a memory jar
- Donating or passing out treats in the pet's honor.

Active mourning helps grief move instead of staying stuck.

WHEN TO SEEK EXTRA SUPPORT

While grief looks different for every child, consider professional support if you notice:

- Ongoing trouble at school
- No emotional response at all, for an extended period of time
- Aggressive or destructive behavior
- Refusal to talk about the pet
- Self-harm or risky behaviors

Grief is natural. Prolonged distress may need extra care.

WHAT ABOUT GETTING ANOTHER PET?

Do not introduce a new pet to "replace" the one who died.

If and when your family considers another animal:

- Make it a shared decision
- Clarify that no one is being replaced
- Allow space between grief and new attachment

Grief and love can coexist, but they should not be rushed.

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A Gentle Reminder

There is no perfect script for talking to a child about death, only honesty, steadiness, and care.

Children do not need protection from grief. They need guidance through it.

When we love, we grieve. And when children learn that grief is safe to feel, they carry that emotional strength for the rest of their lives.

For more resources and support for families navigating pet loss, visit www.jaspergrief.com or use the QR code below.

You and your child do not have to navigate this alone.