



## Pet Loss and Kids' Grief

We teach children how to brush their teeth, be a friend, and multiply fractions, why then do we not teach them how to lose? Everyone loses. Everyone will eventually lose a job, a relationship, and their loved ones. If lives are lived well, our children will one day lose even us.

Having a pet is a wonderful tool to help children with caring for others, the responsibilities of daily chores and hopefully at the end of a long, lovely life, the death of that pet is a learning process as well.

If you are not a fan of a furry friend, then let's face it, **you** will feed and walk more than your child will! A good option is to adopt a goldfish! Have the child help pick the fish up from the store, even contribute chore money or allowance to the purchase of the fish. Enjoy this new family member and hopefully, this will be a positive experience. Once that fish does die, this is an opportunity to teach your child about grief, mourning, and living beyond loss; a life lesson we owe our children.

When a pet dies, do not replace that pet without your child's knowledge. We obviously want to support our children's joy and minimize their pain, but in reality- it is also our job to help them learn to deal with pain in a healthy way.

Once a pet has died, explain that death in an age-appropriate way. (See page on developmental stages of grief). Children need to hear that bodies sometimes have problems or get so old that they can no longer work. Hearts stop and then the bodies are dead. Specific language is important. "Our fish's body stopped working, his heart stopped beating and he died. He cannot live again, death is forever." As you explore death with children your own belief systems are important to share. If you have a faith tradition that holds beliefs about an afterlife, share them with your child. If that is not part of your belief system, it is acceptable to not know. To say we don't know what happens after we die is honest. Children crave both honesty and safety. Expect the question, "Will I die" or "Will you die" and prepare for how you chose to answer.

Here are some good responses:

"Yes, every living thing dies. However, I live a healthy life, I eat well, exercise and go to the doctor for checkups, so it is unlikely that I will die before you grow up. If I do die, your mom and sister and brother will be here for you, and you will be safe and taken care of always. I believe that love does not die, we will still love your goldfish and when I do die when you are a grown-up, you will always love me."

"Yes, you will die a long long time from now, most often we die when we are really old. (State healthy ways to live here, see above). It is very rare for children to die so I don't want you to worry about that. Look how strong you are! (This is a good time to lighten the mood with some humor. Show off your muscles and point to your child's and pretend to wrestle and lose!).

Teach your child about emotions of grief/loss. Name the feelings your child is displaying after the death of a pet. "You look like you might be feeling sadness about your fish dying." "Are you worried about how bodies stop living? "Are you afraid of something after your fish died?" Identification of feelings are the best ways through those feelings. Listen and let your child express their emotions. Explain that sadness and fears come and go, that is what we call grief. We will always miss Mr. Fish and feel sad when we think about him. It is because we loved him that we feel these feelings, and loving something is the best thing we can do in our lives!"

By Elisa Stone, Grief Specialist & coordinator for YoloCares for Kids.

For more support, please call YoloCares at 530-758-5566