



Helping Children Cope With Pet Loss

The loss of a companion animal is difficult at any age, and for children, this difficult experience can even be more painful. Children possess the beautiful ability to love openly, talk to their pets, confide in them, and share their deepest secrets. Mourning is a natural part of the healing process. Standing by your child, and being present and available to talk with them after a pet's passing is extremely important. Children need to witness your sorrow to help them navigate through their own grieving process. It is perfectly okay to let children see you cry, and it's healthy to let them see you smile and laugh when you feel it.

Enclosed in this handout, are guidelines by age, and what your child will understand about death. There is also a listing of reading materials and coloring books that may also be of great help. Dr. Alan Wolfelt Ph.D (**The Center for Loss and Life Transition**), has a variety of books and coloring books for adults and children regarding pet and human loss.

The Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement's website (www.aplb.org) is also highly recommended for additional information. Founder, Dr. Wallace Sife has been helping pet parents for over 20 years, and his free chat room is monitored by professionally-trained hosts.

Also included are some suggestions to help your child remember and honor their best friend. Should you need additional bereavement resources, please don't hesitate to contact me by phone **(609) 259-8300** or email: **arooney@northstarvets.com**.

Keeping you and your family in my thoughts,



Ann Rooney

**NorthStar VETS®
Certified Bereavement
Counselor**



NORTHSTAR VETS®

Veterinary Emergency Trauma & Specialty Center
Leading the Way.

Central NJ: 315 Robbinsville-Allentown Rd., Robbinsville, NJ 08691

Southern NJ: 2834 Route 73 North, Maple Shade, NJ 08052

Jersey Shore: 507 Route 70, Brick, NJ 08723

(609) 259-8300 • northstarvets.com



Pet Loss & Children

Generalized Age-Related Considerations¹

2-3 Year Olds: These children do not have the life experiences to give them an understanding of death. They should be told the pet has died and will not return. It is important that they be reassured that they did not do or say anything to cause the pet's death. Children at this age don't understand what death really means, but they will surely sense and copy your emotions and behavior. Note that it is good to cry and show your own feelings of grief, but these must be controlled and shown to be a normal response to the loss of a loved one. There are healing tears, as well. Extra reassurance, as well as maintaining usual routines will help the child. At this very young age a child will usually accept the loss, without undo emotionality.

4-6 Year Olds: Children of this age group usually have some understanding of death but may not comprehend the permanence of it. They may even think the pet is asleep or continuing to eat, breathe and play- somewhere. They may also worry that their own past anger towards their pet, or some perceived bad behavior was responsible for its death. Manifestations of grief may include bowel or bladder disturbances, as well as a change in playing, eating and sleeping habits. Have frequent, brief discussions, and allow the child to express feelings and concerns. Give extra reassurance.

7-9 Year Olds: Children in this age group know that death is irreversible. They do not normally think this might happen to them, but they may be very concerned about the death of their parents. They are curious and may ask questions that outwardly may appear morbid. These questions are natural and are best answered frankly and honestly. And they are very perceptive about how adults respond to the pet's death. At this age they may manifest their grief in many ways, such as school problems, anti-social behavior, somatic or physical concerns, aggression, and withdrawal or clinging behavior. As with younger children, it is very important that they be reassured that they did not do, or say, anything that had anything to do with the death.

10-12 Year Olds: Children in this age group are usually able to understand that death is natural, inevitable and happens to all living things. They often react to death in a manner very similar to adults, using their parents' attitude as their model. A pet's death can trigger memories of previous losses of any kind, and this should always be open for discussion. There are usually a lot of tears, and special tender loving care is called for.

Adolescents: This generalized age group reacts similarly to adults. However, the typical adolescent span of expression can range from apparent total lack of concern to hyper-emotional. One day they want to be treated like an adult, and the next day they need to be reassured like a young child. Peer approval is also very important. If friends are supportive, it is much easier for them to deal with a loss. Also, keep in mind that an adolescent is trying to find his or her own true feelings, and may be prone to conflict with a parent on how to express them, concerning the loss of a pet. It is very important to avoid disagreement and antagonisms over this.

Young Adults: Although young adults can hardly be called children, the loss of a pet in this age group can be particularly hard. They may also have feelings of guilt for abandoning their pets when leaving home for college/university, work or marriage. There may have been a very close relationship with that pet since early childhood. Among other pressures experienced after the departure from home, this can add additional stress. Due to geographical distances, they are often unable to return to the family home to say goodbye to the pet or participate in family rituals associated with the loss.



¹ Sife, W. 2014. *The Loss of a Pet, A Guide to Coping with the Grieving Process When a Pet Dies*. 4th ed. Howell Book House. 154-156 pp.

Sample Ideas For Memorializing Your Pet



Plant a small garden to memorialize your pet. You or your children could place a letter or poem in the ground and then plant flowers/rose bushes/trees/ etc. – a very private way of expressing feelings. The family can also paint stones with their companion's name or a special message for their loved one.



Ask your child if there is a particular pet toy that was a favorite of their companion that they would like to hold onto as a memento.



Start a memory chain from construction paper and have children write their favorite memory or something your child would always say to his companion. For example, one child wrote: "Waited for me by the bus stop", "Always loved me reading my story book before bed", and my favorite quote of all... "Tanner, stop licking your butt" (LOL). Connect the ends and attach to make a chain. One particular family added to the chain daily, and wrapped it around their Christmas Tree. Another family made a blue/white chain and wrapped it across the dining room to remember their pet during Hanukkah.



Teens have memorialized their companions by using their rabies tag/name tags as jewelry or added them to keychains as a daily reminder. Parents have also done this, but when you ask a teen, you are making them aware that you know how important their companion was to them.

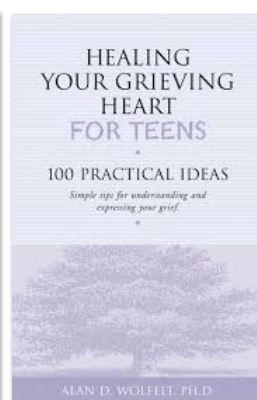
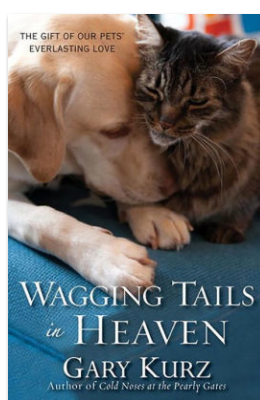
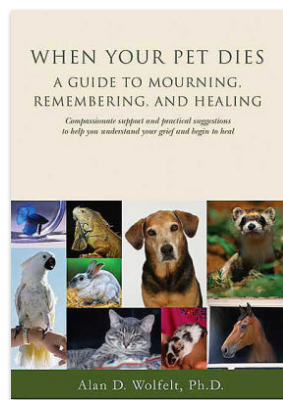
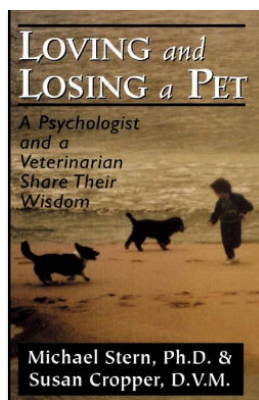
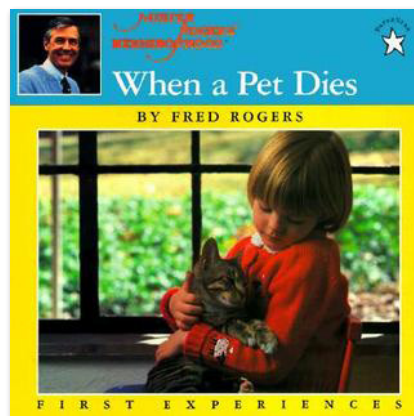
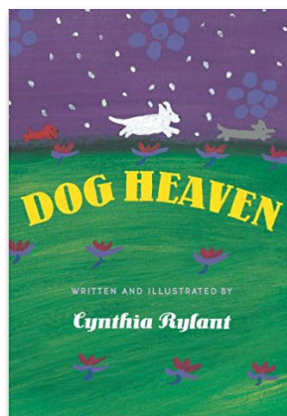
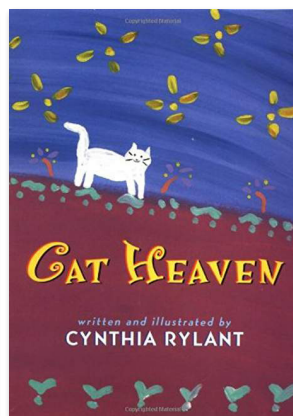
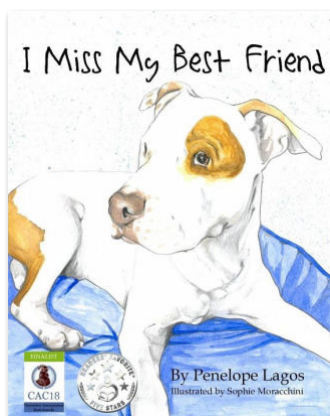
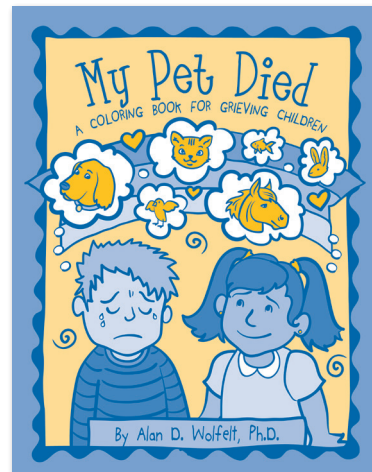
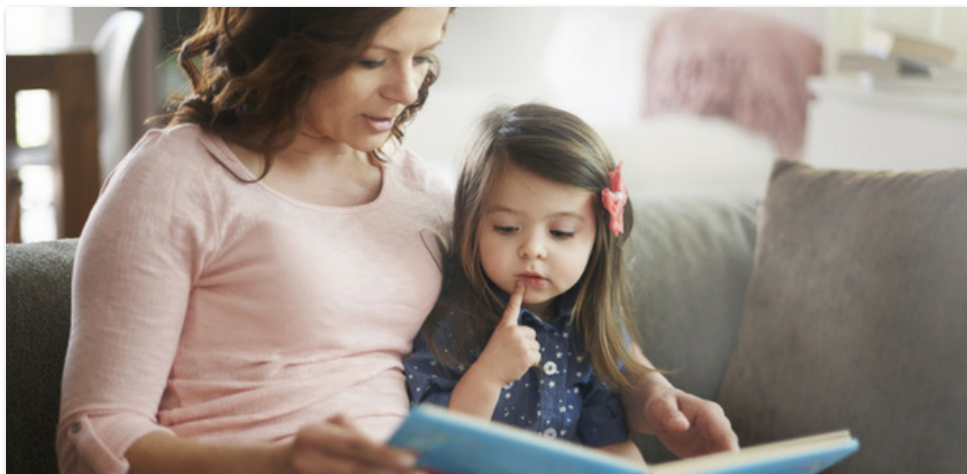


Together as a family, or perhaps your child alone, would like to draw a picture or write a story about your companion. The first day your pet joined your family, fun times, or favorite memories (you can even add photos). This works well for teens as well. Many children grew up with their companion and if they write their own story, include how they are feeling with the loss. Someday as adults talking with their own children, they can share their bereavement story. "When I was your age, I lost . . ." I understand what you are feeling."

NOTE:

Children may have their own thoughts on how they want to remember their best friend. Listen attentively, no idea is too silly – it is whatever helps your child during this time. Also remember that "helping is healing" – donations of pet food, toys, blankets, towels, etc. donated to a local rescue in honor of your companion is also a wonderful way of expressing love.

Suggested Reading / Coloring Books



NOTE:

It is highly recommended to share your family's pet loss with your children's teachers, sport coaches or day care providers. Many times children will talk with friends, but withhold their feelings around adults. Sadness and bereavement can sometimes effect their grades or lead to personality changes. Making teachers aware of the situation may also help with a school therapist if needed.