



Farewell to Fido: Helping Children When Their Companion Dog Dies

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Probably one of the biggest drawbacks of having canine companions is that they usually die before we do. And the strength of our attachment to them in life is usually reflected in the degree of grief that we feel when they are gone. This is true of children as well. It is an old and inaccurate view that children don't feel grief. They do. When a child loses a pet dog, reactions can range from sadness to serious grief, and for some, actual traumatization.

Children experience the loss of a pet dog under a variety of circumstances: the dog is old or ill, there's an accident, the dog is relinquished for some reason, the dog runs away, disappears or is stolen, or parents punish children by removing the dog (an approach that is not recommended!). One particularly difficult situation occurs when the dog bites someone in the family and is subsequently euthanized. Regardless of circumstances, the child has lost a companion, a friend, and often a *best* friend.

Death is a topic that we sometimes want to avoid, but it is part of life, and the death of a companion canine offers an opportunity for children to learn about grief and loss while within the supportive circle of the family. Following are several things that canine professionals might suggest for parents to help children through the grieving process.

Be honest. Sometimes adults are tempted to shield children from the pain of loss by telling "slightly altered" versions of the truth: "Fido went to live on a farm." Despite the good intentions, this approach is not advisable. Even very young children are much more aware of what is happening than adults usually think. Dishonesty leads to distrust, and in this case it prevents children from learning about loss and how to cope with it. Instead, a simple, age-appropriate explanation is warranted: "Fido is very sick and he may not live much longer. Have you noticed how he's been whimpering a lot lately?" Inviting children to talk about their impressions is a valuable way to give them a chance to be heard and to understand their perceptions of

the situation.

Give children a role in the process. When the time comes for a dog to be euthanized, look for ways that children can be involved. It is best to inform children when a dog is near death or must be euthanized. Perhaps the biggest decision is whether or not children should be present when the injections are given. In general, it is beneficial to describe the process briefly to children and give them a choice. Sometimes veterinarians make house calls for this sad duty, allowing opportunities for children to witness the peaceful passing. Some children are surprised at how calm it is, having imagined something far worse.

If children choose not to see the actual death, they can help prepare some soft blankets for the dog, select a favorite dog toy to remain next to the ashes (for cremations), make a special ceramic "head stone" for the dog's grave, or save a snippet of dog hair in a special place. Whenever possible, parents should inform children that the dog is dying so they can pet it one last time or say a private good-bye if they so choose. (*Tip: People should avoid the phrase "putting the dog to sleep." That unfortunate idiom has led to sleepless nights for countless children!*)

Use children's books to help them understand. There are many valuable books written for children about death and loss. My favorite is called *Dog Heaven* by Cynthia Rylant (available at www.dogwise.com). This book uses simple language and child-like illustrations to paint a picture of what dogs experience after death, including lots of biscuits, running around, and playing. This is not a religious book per se, although there is mention of some spiritual concepts like "heaven" and a kindly caretaker "God." It is easy for families to adapt this to their own belief system. Another good book is *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney* by Judith Viorst. There are many others.

Acknowledge children's feelings. Avoid the temptation to gloss over children's feelings of sadness and emptiness. Instead, invite them to talk about these feelings; listen to what they say and help them feel heard: "You're really sad about Fido and you miss him so much. I'm sad and miss him, too." In expressing their feelings, children begin to work through them, just as adults do. Quiet understanding and acceptance are all that parents, teachers, and caregivers need to offer.

After eliciting and listening to their feelings, invite them to write or dictate stories about their pet dog. As you help them express themselves, avoid a somber demeanor and keep a lighter tone. A warm, interested, friendly tone of voice is needed, as this climate provides emotional safety for children. When things get too serious, they can seem scary or intense, causing children to withdraw. One should take their feelings and comments seriously, but do so with a touch of lightness.

Offer creative ways for children to remember and honor their lost pet. Pull children's drawings, stories, and photographs together in a memory book. Hold a symbolic funeral by burying a dog figurine or photograph in a small box in the garden where it won't be *[continued on next page]*



Examples of children's art in honor of their dogs.

disturbed. Place the child's written message to the dog into a helium balloon and send it skyward. Plant a tree or perennial flower in honor of the dog.

Keep daily routines as normal as possible. While it is important to take time for grief, it's best to keep remaining family and school activities relatively normal. This helps provide a perspective on the loss: it's sad and important, but other aspects of life go on. Daily routines can be comforting. If the child's grief prevents him or her from participating in regular activities, help from a mental health professional might be indicated. Play therapists have special training in helping children deal with problems like this by using their natural inclination to play to help them heal (see the Association for Play Therapy's directories menu and choose "Find a Play Therapist" for qualified play therapists in your area, www.a4pt.org).

Consider the timing of a new dog carefully. Some people are ready for a new family dog rather quickly, while others swear never again to have another dog because the pain is too great. This highlights the great variation in people's methods for coping with grief. There is no right or wrong here, although at least a short period (maybe three to four weeks) to allow grieving to occur is advised.

Families should avoid thinking of any new dog as a "replacement" for the dog who has died or disappeared. Each canine is unique and cannot substitute for another. When children or parents have had a very special connection with the lost dog, they often remark that they will never be able to replace Fido. This is true—they can't! The special type of affection, quirky behaviors, or funny antics that Fido provided for them are unique to Fido.

On the other hand, a new dog (acquired whenever the family feels ready) will bring new interactions and enjoyment to the family. The relationship will be different, but has the potential to be equally deep and satisfying—just in a different way. Canine professionals can remind parents/owners of this. Some comparisons with the former dog are probably inevitable, but families are less likely to be disappointed or frustrated when they keep this information in mind.

Consider parents' feelings, too. Sometimes families make decisions about the grief process as well as the acquisition of a new dog primarily with children's needs and wants in mind, but parents' feelings matter, too. Any

decisions should include careful consideration for the children, but parents should not disregard their own reactions and grief. As much as possible, all decisions about how and when to move forward after the loss of a beloved pet should be family decisions. If the children are begging for another dog while the mother is still deeply saddened by the dog's death, it may not yet be time to bring another dog into the family.

Resources Online

The Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement (www.aplb.org) has a vast amount of useful information about pet loss, including ways of helping children, and other sites are available online as well.

In general, grieving is a very individual process. As with human deaths, family members often experience renewed grief on special dates, such as the dog's birthday or adoption date, the one-year anniversary of the death, and on holidays. Knowing that this is normal can help children and families cope better.

The little things are often missed the most: Fido's squeaky bark, how he always got underfoot, the scratches by the back door, the food dish left in the corner, or the patch of dog hair found under the chair. These small remembrances can bring pain, but they are also part of the grief process that honors the dog's meaning to us. This is true for children as well. As the weeks and months pass, family members should not hesitate to mention the dog and his or her meaning to the family. One father told his children at dinner about six months after their dog died, "I used to get irritated with Fido sometimes, but I really miss him when I see the chewed molding in the kitchen now. Fido was a wonderful friend to all of us." His children then shared their own memories and the family spent a tearful few minutes thinking about their special relationship with their dog. While sad, this process takes us to the essence of life—our family and friendships, our laughs and loves. Helping children and sharing our own grief when a family dog is gone can underscore just how important these essentials are to a rich and rewarding life.

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