

Ask the Pediatrician: When a pet dies, how do I help my child cope?

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How your child reacts to your pet's death will depend on their age and developmental level. When children display emotions like sadness, it's important to validate them.

During my own childhood, I remember when a pet died, my well-meaning mother told me I shouldn't dwell on being sad. It's natural to want to protect your [child](#) from unpleasant emotions. But letting [children](#) experience them helps them build coping skills for the future.

Here's what you can do to help your child deal with the loss of a pet.

Explain your own sadness.

If your emotion isn't obvious, this may confuse your child. It's okay to let them see you cry. Keep in mind, though, that not all children—whatever their age—express their grief through sadness. Anger is also a common way to express grief. Understanding this is important so you can help them learn to work through it.

Remember, grief-related emotions can come and go, sometimes without warning. It may take longer than you thought for your child to get through this period. Be sure to let your pediatrician know if your child is having more serious symptoms such as sleep disturbances, anxiety or depression.

Be prepared for questions.

Children may ask about [death](#) and what happens after we die. While the specifics of your answer will depend on your family's beliefs, this is a sign your child wants to talk about it. If they don't bring up questions, especially when you've given them opportunities, it's possible your child might not want to discuss it. Follow their lead.

Create some type of small memorial or ritual.

This can really help your child with the process of saying goodbye after the loss of a pet. The memorial could involve scattering ashes, creating a

memorial collage or planting a tree in the pet's memory. Your child might find this uncomfortable, so try suggesting it gently and follow their wishes.

How to talk with your child about a pet's death: advice by age

What your child understands about death will depend on their age. Here's what you can expect, along with age-appropriate books to help your child understand and cope with losing your family's pet.

Toddlers

Toddlers have a difficult time understanding death. They might ask over and over where the pet is. They may even seem unconcerned by your pet's death. Don't be worried about this—they're not being insensitive or uncaring. At this stage, they simply don't understand the meaning of death.

Recommended reading for toddlers:

- "Something Very Sad Happened: A Toddler's Guide to Understanding Death" by Bonnie Zucker
- "Bear Island" by Matthew Cordell
- "Up in Heaven" by Emma Chichester Clark

Preschoolers

Like toddlers, younger preschoolers may have difficulty with the concept of death. Older preschoolers may start to have a deeper understanding.

Recommended reading for preschoolers:

- "Goodbye Mousie" by Robie H. Harris
- "The Forever Dog" by Bill Cochran
- "The Old Dog" by Charlotte Zolotow
- "Goodbye, Brecken" by David Lupton
- "Alfie and the Birthday Surprise" by Shirley Hughes
- "The Goodbye Book" by Todd Parr

Grade schoolers

At this age, kids are much more able to understand death. If your pet is going to die soon due to old age or illness, this is a good age to prepare your child ahead of time. (See "Parent FAQs about the loss of a family pet," below, for more information.)

Recommended reading for grade schoolers:

- "Love That Dog: A Novel" by Sharon Creech
- "Grandmother Bryant's Pocket" by Jacqueline Briggs Martin
- "Kate, the Ghost Dog: Coping With the Death of a Pet" by Wayne L. Wilson
- "Memories of You" by Erainna Winnett
- "Jasper's Day" by Marjorie Blain Parker
- "The Tenth Good Thing About Barney" by Judith Viorst

Teens

Most teenagers are able to understand abstract concepts like death. Be prepared, though—as with anything, their reaction to grief can span the range of human emotions.

Books on grief and loss for teens tend to be less focused on pets, but they often discuss death in general. Teens' different tastes in types of books—for instance, preferring fiction to nonfiction, or realism to fantasy—can make general reading recommendations challenging too.

Here are some recommendations for nonfiction books about grief. These might also help you understand how to best help your grieving teen.

Recommended reading for teens:

- "The Grieving Teen: A Guide for Teenagers and Their Friends" by Helen Fitzgerald
- "Healing Your Grieving Heart for Teens" by Alan D. Wolfelt
- "Saying Goodbye When You Don't Want To" by Martha Bolton
- "Straight Talk About Death for Teenagers" by Earl Grollman.

More information: More information is available at [HealthyChildren.org](https://www.healthychildren.org).

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