

Missing MY FRIEND

Support for children



**PET BEREAVEMENT
SUPPORT SERVICE**



Losing a pet

Children and young people can become very attached to pets for a variety of reasons...

“She was the only one who understood when I was upset”

“I could tell him all my troubles, and he never got mad at me”

“He was the only thing I could count on when my parents split up”

When a pet dies, it may be a child or young person's first experience of the death or loss of something close to them.

They may feel that they have lost their best friend, an important member of their family and they may feel very sad and lonely. Feelings of numbness, disbelief and denial may be common. Sometimes anger or guilt may also be felt for something they did or said that makes them think they contributed to the death.

The way in which children, young people and those around them deal with pet loss may lay the foundation for how they cope with other losses later in their life.



Children's reaction to the loss of a pet

Most children form strong and special bonds with their pets and they are an important member of the family. The death or loss of a pet may be particularly painful if:

- the pet was very special, such as a first pet
- there have been other losses in the child's life, for example the death of a grandparent, loss of friends by changing schools, or the break-up of parents or other family members

The age of the child and their concept of death may also influence how they react to the loss of a pet.

- Children up to two years of age have little concept of death, but may miss the presence of an animal and will be aware of tensions in the family if others are grieving
- Two to four-year-olds have difficulty grasping that death is permanent and may commonly ask: "Where is Sammie going? Why isn't he moving?"
- Five to ten-year-olds may ask: "Why don't the eyes close? What happens to him when he goes in the ground? Does euthanasia hurt? Will my other pets be lonely?"
- By the age of nine onwards, most children are aware of the biological finality of death and they may be curious about the aspects surrounding death, such as post-mortem or burial
- Adolescence is a time of high emotions and adolescents may be less willing to share feelings or talk about real issues. In fact they may feel closer to their pet than with other members of their family

Useful tips when supporting a child

- Consider other possible losses that the child may be experiencing which may be influencing their grief
- Make sure the child doesn't hear about the pet's death from someone they don't know
- Always be honest about the circumstances – don't pretend that the pet has "gone missing" if, in fact, it has died

- Include the child when discussing options or making decisions about the pet
- Don't underestimate their feelings. Encourage the child to talk about their pet and express their emotions; writing a story or poem or drawing a picture of their pet can be helpful
- Try to understand the importance of the animal and what the child has lost; don't trivialise or minimize their grief
- Use language that the child will understand
 - straightforward words such as "dead" or "died" are more appropriate than "put to sleep", which may cause some confusion and anxiety for younger children
- Be prepared to talk about how the animal died, but don't include distressing details
- Inform their teacher if the child is very upset, but do so discreetly
- Don't be afraid to share your own feelings of sadness
- If children are having other difficulties in their lives, a pet's death may be the last straw and particular care must be taken to understand their problem; professional help may be needed

Saying goodbye

Planning ways to say goodbye and to remember a pet can be helpful and comforting for children and young people.

Burial

- Children can choose the spot, do some of the digging or put flowers on the body
- They may want some kind of ceremony, to invite friends and family
- They could make a gravestone and then paint the pet's name on it or write a message
- They can select bulbs, plants or even trees for planting around the grave

Cremation

- They may want to keep the ashes in a special casket or bury them in a special place
- Ashes can be scattered on favourite walks and special places in the garden



Memorials

Children can be encouraged to remember their animals and celebrate their lives by:

- writing poems or letters to the animal
- painting pictures and making models
- making a scrapbook with photographs or a memory box

Getting another pet

- Timing is important. Getting another pet immediately won't take away the child's pain.
- Talk it through with them. Make sure that any new pet is not seen as a "replacement".
- Blue Cross has a series of pet care and advice leaflets offering guidance for choosing a new pet.

Support line

Sometimes it helps to share feelings with someone who knows from personal experience how distressing the loss of a pet can be for a child or young person, and who will listen with understanding and compassion.

The Pet Bereavement Support Service offers support through its confidential telephone and email service. Trained volunteers are available to provide a listening ear for children as well as information for parents, teachers and guardians about the effect the loss of a pet is having on a child or young person.

**To make contact call:
0800 096 6606**

**The support line is open everyday
from 8.30am – 8.30pm.**

(Some mobile networks may charge)

**email support
pbssmail@bluecross.org.uk**

**The email support line service provides
support for people who prefer to write
about how they are feeling.**

Pet MEMORIAL

You may wish to remember a pet in a special and lasting way with a photograph or by writing a few words or a poem.

Visit: www.bluecross.org.uk

About the **PET BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT SERVICE**

The **Pet Bereavement Support Service** is run by Blue Cross and, since its launch in 1994, it has helped thousands of pet owners of all ages and from all walks of life.

Volunteers respond to calls and emails on the support line everyday. They offer a “listening ear” and give time, patience and encouragement to pet owners as they work through their loss.

The service also offers an opportunity for children, young people and family members to remember a pet in a special way by creating a pet memorial.



Suggested reading for children and adults

Missing My Pet

By Alex Lambert (aged 6).

Goodbye Mousie

By Robie.H.Harris.

Published by Simon R Schuster.

Goodbye Mog

By J. Kerr.

Published by Picture Lions.

The Sunshine Cat

By Miriam Moss.

Published by Orchard Books.

Time to say goodbye

Pet care leaflets available to download at

www.bluecross.org.uk



The charity dedicated to helping sick, injured and homeless pets since 1897.



The Pet Bereavement Support Service is a member of The Helplines Standard and British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy.

For further copies of this leaflet, please contact:

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