**How to prepare your child for the loss of a family pet**

1) Don’t wait until you’ve already lost your pet. Start to prepare her now for what’s coming and in language she can understand. It’s tempting to use euphemisms, but depending on a child’s age, they end up just making the situation more confusing. Language like; “Jasper is getting old now and there’s going to be a time pretty soon when he will die. We want to be very kind to Jasper now and enjoy him and help him be happy.” can help elicit the kinds of questions that, while hard for parents, are important for your child to ask and get answered.

J. Viorst has an excellent children’s book about the death of a pet called The Tenth Good Thing about Barney and this can be an excellent way to help your conversations.

2) Let them be as sad as they are. It’s a perfect time to practice one of the things that’s hardest for parents: letting their kids feel what they do without trying to make them feel “better.” Try too to not assume what you’re feeling is what they’re feeling. Pay attention to what’s going on with your child…it may be quite different from your experience. Know too that a child that’s too young to understand death, or even really get that your pet is gone can pick up on the grief in the household. Not understanding is not the same as not being affected.

3) Make sure they know they weren’t the cause and that this sort of thing happens as part of life. If your child had been angry with the dog, or wished he would “go away” and then the dog dies, she can feel responsible.

4) Have a ceremony. There’s a reason they exist in society…we’re probably hard-wired to draw comfort from them. This goes for just about any loss, and certainly for the loss of a much-loved pet. You can see too if any local shelters accept unused food or other items and let your child see that act as Jasper’s gift to dogs that didn’t get as much love as he did.

5) Let your child’s teacher or any other caretakers know of the loss so they can contextualize any behavior changes on the part of your child.

And finally, don’t rush right out and get another pet. Being sad for a while without being distracted really helps children mature around feelings. A new pet shouldn’t be seen as a replacement, but as a new member of the family.

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