

The First Goodbye

For many families children and pets go hand in hand. Having a pet can be a wonderful part of a child's life and an unforgettable learning experience. When a pet dies it is often the first time that a child will experience the loss of "someone" important to them and the feelings of grief that come with this event.

The day that we bought home three cute guinea pigs for our children to care for, love and adore - I never thought that my youngest (then 5 years old) would go on a journey that would give her an insight into loss and grief and how her world might be changed.

Some time later my daughter's guinea pig Bonita became sick. We spent the next couple of days looking after her, giving her medicine and hand feeding her. But she was not getting better. It was then that I decided that I would be clear, open and honest about what was before us.

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My 5 year old took on caring for her sick pet, but became a little solemn when she saw that she was getting sicker. The morning the guinea pig died, my daughter just thought she was sleeping. When I told her gently that Bonita had died, my little girl was devastated.

Through her tears, she was asking questions about how and why she died. I was able to answer some of her questions very simply and honestly. But for other questions that I had no answer to, I could only say that I really didn't know.

After many tears and hugs, I was mindful about how much involvement my daughter wanted to take in the burial. It was then that I saw my youngest taking an extremely mature step in volunteering to be with her most loved guinea pig every step of the way.

Bonita was wrapped in a beautiful rose coloured napkin and my daughter led the way, carrying her to the bottom of the garden. She was then placed in a little grave and my 5 year old said a heartfelt

prayer that brought tears to the whole family. My little girl then walked back to the house with her heart completely broken and was subdued for the rest of the day.

We all felt her pain. As the youngest of the family, she had to travel this journey which was unknown to her siblings. We were with her every step of the way, respecting her silence, answering questions honestly (and appropriately for her age).

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Things that we noticed were helpful included talking about the positive aspects of her pet, memorable moments and shared funny stories. I could sense that she was becoming more willing to express her feelings about her grief. She wanted to draw pictures of her pet and to share her story with her teacher and class mates. She started to carry a photo ring of her beloved pet on her school bag (which she still has now).

Months went by and we didn't buy a new pet. My youngest was able to grieve and in time she felt ready to think about another pet - that's when we bought another one. She has said that now she has two pets, one with her and one in heaven (as she understands it).



Death and dying are among the most difficult 'facts of life' that we as parents have to try to explain to our children. How we handle this with our children is what gives them an early understanding of this emotion-charged part of life. How we ourselves encounter experiences of loss also helps to equip our children with the tools and or skills to work through their feelings of grief and bereavement.

These are some things to keep in mind for helping children cope with the death of a pet:

- Remember that children at various ages perceive death differently.
- Be honest, clear and age appropriate when talking about what has happened, so that your child doesn't develop expectations that may be disappointed later (e.g. gently explain that the pet will not come back).
- When answering children's questions, it is OK to say that you don't know the answer.

- It's best not to make up stories as your child may become unsure or confused as to what the truth is (e.g. saying that the pet has gone to sleep may result in your child expecting the pet to wake up)
 - Encourage your child to talk about what has happened and express their feelings. This can be through drawings, writing stories or poems, even singing or dancing, depending on their age and interests.
- Choose rituals that fit your family***
- Follow your child's lead in these conversations and in decisions about how they choose to grieve and what rituals they would like.
 - Choose rituals that fit your family: consider holding a memorial for that pet or mark the anniversary on the calendar.
 - Talk about the positives regarding the pet, qualities, memories and how your child loved and cared for that pet.
 - Collect some memorable keepsakes of that pet e.g. a photo key ring or a picture pasted in a book that they often carry can be special for your child to carry with them.
 - Do not replace the pet immediately, as your child will need some time to grieve. When the next pet is brought home, it can be a special experience and seen as a "new" pet rather than a "replacement".

My brave little girl still sheds a tear for her beautiful little pet sometimes but now it is done through love and not pain.

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