

## WHEN A PET DIES

by [Betsy](#) on Jan.29, 2013

under [Behavior](#), [Child development](#), [Communication](#), [Learning](#), [Parent modeling](#), [Parenting](#), [Relationships](#), [Sensitive Topics](#)

More times that I can count, I have received a call from a parent saying sadly, “We have to put our dog down. I just can imagine what I am going to say to my little boy.” And every single time I kick myself for not including such an important and weighty question in the chapter, *Learning About Death*, that is in my book, [Just Tell Me What to Say](#).

As with all learning, the child’s curiosity about, awareness and understanding of death grows bit by bit, one piece built on the last, like scaffolding. (But does anyone *really* ever understand life’s one great inevitability, death?) And there are so many components parts that make up the concept of death and give it a context—the life cycle, life spans, aging, terminal illness, and what happens after death. That’s a whole lot for a child to learn.

Death is not something from which children should be sheltered. It begins as soon as the child is able to notice that dead leaves are falling off the trees. Learning about this reality of life from the people she loves and trusts puts her squarely on track for open and honest communication as she grows and brings her heavy duty questions to you. In reality, somewhere around the age of four, most children start to wonder about death, weave it into their dramatic play, lace their vocabularies with words like dead, die, kill, shoot, all in an attempt to wrap their arms around this difficult topic. Good for them; it’s part of the growing and learning process. It is hard for anyone to deal with the death of a person, someone known. Thankfully, it is less frequent that a young child is exposed to a person who is dying. More likely, it is the death of a pet that is the child’s first brush with the concept of death. How is a parent to deal with that?

Helping children to learn through the death of a pet is one of the many stepping stones to learning to deal with their sad feelings and to their healthy emotional development. Below are some suggestions for helping a child to deal with a pet's death.

When the child, 7 years and younger, sees that his pet is dead:

1. Do not avoid it. As sad as it is, and as hard as it is to allow your child to experience sadness, your child will grow from the experience. Sadness is one of life's flavors.
2. Do not sugar coat the reality. Less is more. Give simple, clear information. *"Buddy Dog died. He is not alive anymore. None of the parts of his body are working. He can't walk or move or see or hear or lick or bark or pee or poop. He is all done living."*
3. Answer his all questions simply, honestly, and age appropriately.
4. If your child asks what you are going to do with him, depending upon your plan, I suggest saying, *"I am taking Buddy's all-done body to the vet. The vet has a special place where he takes pets' bodies when they are all done living, when they have died."*
5. Cremation need not be part of the death story for a young child. The death itself is difficult enough without adding a whole new, scary part.

When a dog (pet) must be put down, I suggest more round-about approach with the child 7 years and younger.

1. Craft the truth carefully. Telling your child *"Buddy went to play in the country"* when the child comes home to find him gone, is not a good idea.
2. Be careful not to use the word "sleep," as in "putting him to sleep," with a young child. This is especially important if you value your own uninterrupted nighttime sleep. No one needs a child who fears going to sleep.
3. Since it is likely that your dog has been displaying signs of aging or illness, begin by telling her that you are taking the dog to the vet, even if you

already know the prognosis. *“Buddy is just not well, so I need to take him to the vet.”* If the child asks if the dog is going to die, you can say, *“I don’t know. I only know that the vet will try to help Buddy feel better and fix his problem.”*

4. If it is a question of aging, you can say, *“Buddy is getting very old. Parts of his body are starting not to work so well. I am hoping the vet can help him to feel more comfortable.”* And to the question, “Is he going to die?” you can answer, *“Yes, he is going to die one day. He is getting very old for a dog. But I hope it isn’t too soon.”*(An explanation of life spans, as found in my book, may be in order here.)

5. Ease your child into the reality, slowly. While you know the vet is putting the animal down, your child need not know the reality right when it happens. You can give your child daily progress reports. On day two, for example, *“The vet called to say that Buddy is not doing well, he is not better. The vet is having a hard time fixing the problem in his stomach.”* And on day three, *“The vet called today to say that he just can’t fix Buddy’s problem.”* Your child will ask if he is going to die, and you answer honestly, *“Yes, I think so.”* And on day four, you will deliver the sad news. *“Today the vet called to say that Buddy Dog died. I feel so sad.”*

6. Remember, you are a model of how to react and behave. Your own outward expression of sadness gives your child permission to be sad.

7. Together you can process the death by remembering Buddy Dog. Don’t be quick to *disappear* his food dish and toys. Their presence will enable you to recall how much you loved him and how much you miss him. Time does help to heal, after all.

Take time before getting a new pet. Children need to know that we don’t just replace loved ones. We mourn and feel sad and remember...and then move on when we are ready.