

## Helping Children Cope with Pet Loss – Dr. Brittany Johnson

The loss of a beloved pet is hard any time of the year and can be especially difficult around the holiday season. We veterinarians often act as guides when making the heartbreaking decisions about when to euthanize, and a topic we are frequently asked about is how should parents navigate pet loss with their children.

The bond between a child and their pet can be very loving and deep, and if that pet has been a part of the child's life since they were very young, the loss of a pet can be akin to losing a family member. It's important to be as open and honest as possible with children when facing end of life decisions. Using realistic words like "death" and "euthanasia" may help children understand the difference between losing the pet and simply taking the pet into the hospital for routine appointments. If a pet is sick with a terminal illness, explaining early on to the child what is happening to the pet's health and helping them understand that the pet is in pain or is suffering is one of the best ways to prepare them for the loss. The sudden loss of a pet may be more difficult for a child to experience, but explaining that although the loss of the pet is scary and upsetting, alleviation of the pet's suffering is a selfless act of compassion that we as loving pet owners have to do.

We are also regularly asked if children should be present during euthanasia. My first response to any parent is, you know your child better than anyone, what do you think is most appropriate? If the child is old enough, it's perfectly fine to ask them directly if they would like to be there. If the child does decide they want to be present and you feel it is appropriate, prepare them for what to expect and allow them to ask questions, to you the parent, or to the veterinarian. Sometimes younger children may not fully understand what euthanasia or pet loss is and upon seeing that their parent is upset can in turn make them upset. I have found that very young children may divert a parent's attention during their time of grief, and I generally recommend that if a child isn't old enough to understand the situation, they not participate.

Each child will be very different in how they process their loss and traverse this new life experience. Making art and mementos has been something I found to be incredibly beneficial to both children and adults. I have asked younger children to draw pictures of their pets, or decorate clay paw prints, or even take clippings of hair to help them remember their pet and process their grief. Talking openly with children about their favorite memories and particular things about their pet can also be very beneficial before and during the healing. Children may have a lot of questions that parents don't know how to answer and it's okay to tell them "I don't know" or "I will find you the answer". Veterinarians can be a great resource and most are a valuable resource to explain the process of euthanasia and how to help all family members cope with loss. There are many books and online resources available for all age groups too.