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Ask Dr. Harold: Your Child's Grieving Process

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Grieving

The mourning process is well researched and can be helpful to know. Shock or disbelief comes first. This may be the child looking all over the house for the pet. Denial comes next and is where you explain to the child what happened. Bargaining and guilt can sometimes follow. This could be where the child tries to come up with some behavior they do to get the pet to come back. Anger is often part of the process. The child might blame all sorts of events or people for taking their pet away. They need to be reassured that, as a close friend of my said, "dogs are amazing, they just don't live long enough". Next will be sadness and acceptance. Time is an important factor. Take note not to rush a child through to the next stage. Be with them in the stage they are in and help them to remember all the great and funny stories about the pet to get them through. Let them in on your process and how you are navigating. Tell them the memories you focus on to feel better.

Express and Celebrate

Tell stories about the pet. Make up legends that go along with the pet's accomplishments. Make the stories a place where the characters can talk about their feelings. Express in a variety of ways. Draw, write a letter, sing a song, do an activity. "Doing" allows for expression to take place. Be open to the activity matching where the child is in the grieving process. If they are angry then an angry song is great. Kids can get confused when we try to get them to express happy when they are sad. Often times they do what we all do when we are confused shut down expression. When they are sad and you want to pick them up, you can tell your favorite story and then see if they want to follow. You ultimately can help them find the meaning that the pet had in their life. And then help them to celebrate that meaning.

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A parent recently wrote to me and asked how to help their child deal with the loss of their family dog. So here are some things you can do to help children with their grieving process.

Perspective

Many people like their animals more than they like people. If you are one of these people, you know what I am talking about. If you are not, take my word for it - the loss of a pet can be one of the most difficult events in a person's life. Kids in particular can learn a lot from the animals that they have around. They can learn joy from their dog and independence from their cat. They learn to be responsible for another being in a way that can be a lot less threatening than being responsible for themselves. And when the pet passes away, they can learn about how to deal with loss if we guide them well.

Life and Death

The first dynamic to process for the child is the actual dying of the pet. Taking into account the developmental level of the child, it is important to let them know that the pet is in a different place where they are not suffering. Using your cultural tradition here is a great idea. We sometimes make mistakes by trying to avoid our children feeling pain by being vague or using terms that are above their understanding. They need to know that the pet is not coming back. Terms like "put to sleep" need to be avoided with children who are not old enough to understand the medical procedure. A ritual like a pet funeral or letter to the animal can be an important. Balancing the loss with the fond memories can be helpful at the ceremony.