

## **EXPLAINING ANTICIPATORY PET LOSS TO A TODDLER**

By Claire Gillenson, M.A. Pet Loss Educator/Grief Coach

I had a referral come in recently about pet loss and children. A mom emailed, sharing their 17 year old cat was ready to transition. She wasn't sure if she should tell her 3 1/2 year old daughter, what to tell her etc. For many pet lovers, our first glimpse of death may have been as a child. For that reason alone, I cannot overemphasize the importance of honesty. It can lay the foundation for how we deal with loss the rest of our lives. (Bury our feelings, get another pet, grief alone, etc).

Our pets are more than a member of our family. Often, when to say goodbye is one of the hardest choices we have to make on behalf of our furry family member who cannot speak. How do we explain this to our children?

### **So what do we say?**

Honesty is the best policy. Don't make up answers in an effort to make your child feel better. My mother passed away 4 years ago. My daughter knows that both her grandmothers are dead. They were sick (truth). She asks me where they went. I told her that we don't really know where one goes when we die (literally, religious beliefs aside).

Below are some ways you can discuss anticipatory pet loss with your

toddler at home. We hope it brings peace to you and your family at this time.

**Spend some time describing what “death” is for beloved pet.** He is sick, he will stop breathing and he won't be able to play with your child anymore. His body will be still, his fur will be cold. You may want to have this discussion with your child before the euthanasia process. Explain in simple terms what Euthanasia is if your child is older. Also at this time, review some happy memories about your beloved animal companion. Be open to discussing feelings your child might have. Ask your child how he/she feels, sad, mad, etc. ask if he/she wants to share anything with your beloved pet (a story, a stuffed animal, draw a picture).

**What not to say:** Don't use the term your pet “went to sleep” in connection with death, or your child may develop a fear of going to sleep because he/she is afraid that, like your pet, they won't wake up. Consider finding an alternative phrase than saying that the pet was so sick it went to sleep or went to heaven, your child may fear that this may happen to her if he/she becomes sick or injured. Your child may also fear that if this could happen to the family pet it could also happen to someone else in the family, like Mommy or Daddy.

Consider making a pawprint or clipping some hair to have as a keepsake. Create some rituals after the euthanasia to bond with your family. Go to the library and check out children's book dealing with pet loss. I also have written one called *My Heart Remembers My Pet* that is available as a pdf. Be sure to be gentle with yourself too. As parents, in making sure our kids are fine, our own sorrows sometimes takes a back seat. Kids are transparent. Like sponges, their open hearts can handle honesty. Allow

your heart to be too. Sharing your feelings with your child will bring additional comfort.

**Additional questions and activities:**

- ★-Write down what are some of your pet's favorite things to do, -
- ★ -What are their favorite foods to eat?
- ★ -What are their favorite treats?
- ★ -What do they like to do?
- ★ -Draw pictures of your pet with your family
- ★ -Write down "feelings" your toddler has around death.
- ★ -Is he/she sad? Angry? Explain all of these feelings are normal.
- ★ -Explain what happens when an animal dies. They stop breathing. Their fur/coat is cold. They look like they are asleep but they are not going to wake up.
- ★ -Plan a ritual to say goodbye to your beloved pet.

Please reach out if I can be of additional help. I would love to connect with you! Call for a complimentary 30 minute session @ 310-314-9837 or email me at [claire@clairegillenson.com](mailto:claire@clairegillenson.com)

For more information, goto: <http://www.clairegillenson.com>