

Mental Health

Helping a Child After a Pet's Death

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A pet can be a child's best friend - and cause heartbreak when it dies. *Pezibear - Pixabay*

When a beloved pet dies, some parents prefer to hide the truth from their children, even if it means lying. But this approach can backfire. Minnesota resident John P., now 37, still remembers the lie surrounding his childhood dog's death.

When he was about 10, his dog Penny contracted canine meningitis. The dog was taken to the vet, John said. "It was near the karate studio I attended. Dad took me to my lesson. I begged him to let me see Penny and say good-bye to her [because] the vet said she would die. He promised he would. On the way home he drove past the vet though, not stopping." When John asked why they didn't stop, his dad said that Penny had been put to sleep. "I never trusted him after that."

In Massachusetts, the home of Susanne Gilliam handled the loss of their 10-year-old Shetland sheepdog a lot differently. "When we were all gathered at home, we were sitting around the kitchen table in a giant puddle of family tears. Slowly, we started to remind each other about "remember the time..." As the memories flowed, I got out my laptop and typed up each one with an indication of which of us said what. It is rough and typo filled but it was *exactly* what we all needed to do."

A pet's death may be a child's first exposure to this cruel reality of life. The loss can hit a child hard, harder than adults in their life may realize. And if the grief isn't addressed, it may lead to mental health issues later in life, said researchers in an article published in [European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry](#). The study covered 6,000 children.

About [85 million households](#), or 67% of households in this country, have at least 1 pet. The Gilliams make up for a few that don't. "We got our first dog when my oldest was 2," said Ms. Gilliam, 63. The family has had many more pets over the years, and now shares the home with their 2 shelties and 2 cats. They also have a horse in a boarding stable.

Grief Is Part of Love

Grief is an inevitable part of loving someone or something. Adults grow attached to their pets because of the comfort, companionship and love they bring to their life, but children have an added attachment to their companions, Scott A. Roth, Psy.D., a licensed psychologist in Cranbury, NJ, said in an email to *Medical Daily*. "Children use their parents as models of nurturing and often pets are their first object that a child can attach to and nurture themselves," he explained. "They can be involved in their caretaking, play, and so on. As such, the child forms a bond with the animal often modeled after their own bond with their parents."

But what happens when that bond is broken? The researchers, from Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, wanted to learn more about the relationship between children and their pets' deaths, and how grief felt in childhood might impact behavior or emotions in adulthood. They obtained data covering more than 6,000 children from birth to 7 years, dividing the children into 3 groups. They never had pets, had pets but didn't lose one to death, or they had a pet who died.

The researchers then compared the children's mental and emotional health at age 8. They found that children who had loved and lost had more psychopathologic symptoms than those who loved without loss, especially among boys. This was noticed across the board, regardless of economic status and parent education levels. Psychopathologic symptoms include mood changes, changes in eating habits, difficulty concentrating, and more. Interestingly, there was no difference in psychopathologic symptoms between children who lost a pet and those who never had a pet.

Does this mean that maybe parents shouldn't give their children pets – to spare them the pain? Not necessarily, said Dr. Roth. "A parent must measure that relatively low risk associated with "loved and lost" with the potential emotional and psychological gains such as companionship, nurturance, teaching, caretaking, emotional support, etc.," he explained. While the study didn't touch on these factors, they should be considered when a parent makes this decision.

Ms. Gilliam agreed. Yes, it's terribly painful when pets die, but they give so much more than they take, she said. And, as hard as losing a pet is – at any age – it is a teachable moment, according to Dr. Roth. Children learn how to give support and how to receive it. They can also learn what helps them get through difficult times.

That Defining Moment

When Ms. Gilliam's oldest was 12 and they brought that first dog to the vet for a check-up. "Our vet casually said that something didn't seem right and he wanted us to follow up with another vet," she said. She had no idea she was being referred to an oncologist, and it was only at that visit that she and her 2 oldest children learned that the dog was dying.

The laptop exercise helped them refocus from the sudden and sharp pain of their loss to the 10 years they had with him. They laughed at memories, like the sounds of his nails along the floor when he heard his food bowl and how the oldest son could bravely stay home alone the first few times, because he had his faithful companion at his side.

When adults are trying to help a child grieve, it's important to find what works for that child. "Allow the child to freely express how they feel," Dr. Roth said. "Remembering the positive memories of the pet can also be helpful. Younger kids can draw pictures or create memory boxes. Older children can write about their pets in a journal or create a scrapbook. There is something very therapeutic about creating a permanent remembrance of their pet."

Her three children never lost their love for furry companions. The oldest plans on getting a dog when his children are a bit older. A daughter lives at home so she cares for and enjoys the family pets, but must share them when her younger brother comes home to visit. As for John? The family did get another dog

later, but his dad and the dog never hit it off.



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