



# helping kids cope with GRIEF of LOSING a PET

by Linda Goldman

**P**ets touch our lives and give those lives meaning. Too often children and adults are discounted for the great love they feel for their pet, and the deep sorrow experienced when that pet is very ill or dies” (Lucy Let’s Go, Goldman, 2014).

Pet death may sometimes be discounted as not important, and those undermining words “we’ll get you another one” are offered as a hollow consolation. The message they give can diminish the love the child has for the pet, whether it is a goldfish, hamster, dog, cat or horse. The death of a pet can serve as a teachable moment to include children as recognized mourners. It can prepare them for other deaths or losses that will occur in their lives.

## THE STORY OF SAMANTHA

Samantha was Jasmine’s dog. She was hit by a car and severely injured with no chance of recovery, while Jasmine, a first grader, was at school. She came home, her dog was gone and her mom was in tears. Jasmine needed to understand what happened to Samantha. Mom explained she was hurt so badly and was suffering so much that the vet had to “put her to sleep.” Jasmine began to worry. If I go to sleep, I might not come back. Jasmine knew Samantha was dead, yet, she still wondered if she would wake up soon and come back home. Mother explained, “No, Samantha can’t come back from the dead. Death and sleep are not the same.”

There are many ways to help Jasmine grieve. When Jasmine sees her mom's sadness looking at Samantha's favorite ball, she serves as a role model of love and permission to cry. Kids also need explanations of what has happened so that missing pieces won't be filled in with their own unrealistic imagination and interpretation. Young children should be given the simplest information possible while still sharing needed facts for their growth. How did Samantha die? What did the vet do? Who took her to the vet? Did she cry? Where did her body go? Can I see her? These questions are useful to answer. Caring adults can respond by saying, "Samantha won't be back. We won't see her again. Her body has stopped working. It is very sad, and we will miss her very much. We can give Samantha a memorial service and say goodbye to her." Jasmine needed to work through the following various feelings associated with grieving:

- Understand that the loss is real
- Feel the hurt
- Learn to live life without Samantha
- Transform the emotional energy of grief into life again

Jasmine can commemorate Samantha's death informally or with a real ceremony. As long as she is involved, if she chooses to be, she will be able to express her grief. In this way, Jasmine can affirm the value of the life that was Samantha's. Jasmine decided to invite her family, friends and two pet dogs in the neighborhood. She read poetry, played music and planted flowers as a tribute. She put a picture of her and Samantha by her bed to help remember her.

Once Jasmine had understood, grieved and commemorated her dog's death, she felt more ready to "go on." This readiness involves knowing it will be all right to start life again, to play with other dogs or even hope to get a new one. Going on is not the same thing as forgetting. Samantha will live in Jasmine's heart. She may even re-grieve on the anniversary of the day that Samantha died. Yet, Jasmine's grief experiences with Samantha can strengthen her ability to cope with other losses that she will assuredly face in life. The following are suggestions in creat-

ing experiences to support children in pet loss and death.

#### LET KIDS KNOW

"Samantha won't be in your daily life, but she will be in your memory."

#### LET KIDS TALK

"I'm sad, angry and scared about what happened to Samantha. I feel so lonely without her. What do you mean when you say, 'put to sleep?'"

#### LET KIDS PARTICIPATE

Jasmine can choose what to do with Samantha's toys, bowl or collar. Where should we put her pictures? What kind of a ceremony would she like to have? Who would she like to invite?

#### LET KIDS BE UNIQUE

Each child is different and so is his or her grief. Jasmine wants to plant a tree near Samantha's favorite spot in the backyard. It is her special way of remembering Samantha.

#### WAYS TO HELP CHILDREN WITH PET GRIEF

Veronica loved her dog Muffin a lot. One day he was struck by a car and killed while she was at school. A well-meaning neighbor took Muffin's body away. Veronica didn't get to say goodbye.

Skylar had a problem dog named Brewster. He couldn't do tricks, he couldn't get house-trained and Skylar's parents constantly tried to give him away. No one wanted a problem dog like Brewster. One day Skylar came home and Brewster was gone. Mom said they gave his dog to a good home, but Skylar doubted that. He was plagued by certain questions: Was Brewster living? Was he dead? Was he suffering? Why hadn't he stayed home that day? He could have saved Brewster.

These two stories on pet loss or death help to formulate the following generic model. It represents ways we can help the grieving child with pet bereavement.

1. Tell children the truth, in an age-appropriate way, surrounding the pet loss or death.
2. Allow children to see the pet after the

pet has died, if the body is relatively intact. It helps make death real.

3. Create a funeral or memorial for the pet when possible. Let the children have a part in rituals and saying goodbye.
4. Acknowledge children's memories and support them in talking about their pet.
5. Encourage children to express their feelings. Express your own.
6. Be aware of guilt feelings and magical thinking surrounding circumstances around the pet. (Why didn't I stay home from school that day? Why did I let my dog go outside?) Discuss ways the child was good to his or her pet. Discuss regrets, too.
7. Use rituals to work through grief. Share photos, write feelings and talk about memories. Draw a picture for or of the pet. Save a special object (collar or ball) in a special place.
8. Parents should contact the child's school. Have educators let the child know they care. Use discussions as a teachable moment in school.
9. Network. Use a support system of people who understand the depth of grief involving pet loss (family, friends, veterinarians).

*Adapted from "Life and Loss: A Guide to Help Grieving Children, 3rd Edition," Goldman, 2014*

#### A TEACHABLE MOMENT

The death of a pet can serve as a teachable moment to allow children to be recognized mourners. By including children in memorializing, this death can also prepare young people for other losses or deaths they will experience growing up. Girls and boys can actively participate by having a memorial, inviting friends, writing a poem, sending off a balloon or even burying a dog bone.

When a pet is very ill or dying, children can also participate in celebrating his or her life. Ginger was a wonderful dog and a beloved family member. She was 13 years old and diagnosed with terminal cancer. Sally, 10, loved her little dog, and



decided to have a celebration of her "best friend's" life. She invited the neighbors, her relatives and friends and made cookies in the shape of Ginger. Sally's mom bought dog balloons, and the family made a huge collage of pictures of Ginger's life. Sally and her 10-year-old brother Matthew created a puppet show about Ginger. Their parents took pictures of the celebration. Everyone shared memories about Ginger. Sally sang a song about how much she loved her. Matthew wrote Ginger a letter that said, "I love you Ginger for being with me and protecting my family." This celebration of Ginger's life provided children and adults an avenue to say goodbye.

#### INCLUDING CHILDREN IN MEMORIALIZING

The following are practical ways children can celebrate a pet's life. By becoming active participants, children can be included as part of the grief community.

- Create rituals
- Invite friends and family
- Sing songs

- Write a letter or play
- Plant flowers
- Bake cookies
- Share a poem
- Blow bubbles
- Create a memory book, box or table
- Buy or make a pet statue or plaque
- Send off a balloon
- Make a tape recording or video

#### COMMON PET CLICHÉS THAT INHIBIT GRIEF

Often adults share familiar clichés that can be harmful and inhibit the grief process. These clichés may minimize a child's love for their pet and the deep feelings associated with that love.

- "It's only a dog. We will get you another one."
- "It's just a hamster. Get over it."
- "Your cat was dying. They had to put her to sleep."
- "Don't be a baby and cry. It's not a person."
- "Your doggie was so old. She lived a long life. You shouldn't be sad."
- "Time to move on. It's been a few weeks" ("Lucy Let's Go," Goldman, 2014).

#### COMMON SIGNS OF GRIEVING CHILDREN

Caring adults must be aware of the common signs grieving children so often exhibit after the death of a pet. This knowledge helps to normalize thoughts, feelings and behaviors girls and boys may display, and reassure them that their feelings are a natural part of grieving and healing.

- Crying
- Regression
- Withdrawal
- Nightmares
- Anger
- Tiredness
- Inability to concentrate
- Isolation
- Stomachaches and headaches
- Speaks of loved one in the present
- Excessive worry about dying and death
- Need to tell and retell their story

For young people and caring adults, the death of a pet can be a significant grief experience and highly meaningful in their lives. For many girls and boys, the death of a pet may be minimized or ignored.

Matt's lizard Dexter didn't seem important to his dad, but Matt cried when he saw Dexter motionless in the water. Similarly, Amy's teacher told her not to be sad about the death of her cat, Iris, because she still has a dog she can play with.

Children's grief related to pet loss and death needs to be acknowledged as an important life event in a safe and open environment allowing for sharing of feelings and memories.

"The death of a pet is indeed a life lesson for children. As caring adults, we can acknowledge and honor the deep attachments our children make to living things. As role models, we can support, facilitate and validate the importance of saying goodbye" ("Lucy Let's Go," Goldman, 2014). ◀

#### RESOURCES FOR CHILDREN ABOUT PET LOSS AND DEATH

- 1) *Children also grieve: Talking about death and healing,* by Linda Goldman (2005)
- 2) *Goodbye Mousie,* by Robie Harris (2001)
- 3) *Lucy let's go: Helping children love a pet through dying and death,* by Linda Goldman (2014)
- 4) *Zach and his dog: A story of bonding, love, and loss for children and adults to share together* by David Meagher (2009)

#### RESOURCES FOR ADULTS TO HELP CHILDREN WITH PET LOSS

- 1) *Life and loss: A guide to help grieving children, 3rd Edition,* by Linda Goldman (2014)
- 2) *Pet loss and human emotion, 2nd Edition: A guide to recovery,* by Cheri Barton Ross and Jane Baron-Sorenson (2007)



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