Talking with a child after a pet dies

For parents, caregivers and other adults

You may be upset yourself and unsure how to begin. Start with a short explanation, then pause. Use your pet's name and words your child understands.

Start with what happened.

You could say: "I have sad news. [Pet's name] died. Their body has stopped working and will not start again." If needed, explain that a dead animal cannot breathe, eat or feel pain. Avoid describing death as sleep or a trip away; a child may expect the pet to wake up or return.

Let their questions guide you.

Answer what they ask, in a few sentences. Keep explanations about the cause of death factual. "I don't know" is an honest answer. If they ask the same question again, repeat the explanation; young children may need to hear it more than once.

Make room for their response.

They may cry, feel angry, ask practical questions or go back to playing. Try: "I miss them too," or "Would you like to talk, or would you rather sit together?" Follow their lead if they do not want to talk.

Say what you are feeling, too.

If they see you cry, explain: "I'm crying because I miss them. You haven't done anything wrong." Let another adult support you when you need it, so your child is not responsible for comforting you.

Offer a way to remember, without insisting.

Ask whether they would like to choose a photograph, draw a picture or tell a story about the pet. They can say no. Avoid offering another animal as a replacement for the one who died.

Ask for help if you are concerned.

If grief is making sleep, school or everyday life difficult, speak with your child's doctor or a qualified child bereavement professional.

Further reading

Child Bereavement UK: Explaining death and dying to children

American Academy of Pediatrics: When a Pet Dies