

Kids react differently when a beloved pet dies

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(HealthDay)—Losing a pet isn't easy—no matter what your age. But, children respond to the death of a pet in a number of different ways, research shows.

While this is a common occurrence, "how children understand death in these moments, and the ideas, feelings and responses they have when their pets die are largely ignored topics," said Joshua Russell, an assistant professor of animal behavior, ecology and conservation at Canisius College, in Buffalo, N.Y.

His interviews with children aged 6 to 13 whose pets had died revealed that youngsters regard pets as more than just animals.

"They often see themselves as the center of their pets' affections. They describe their pets as siblings or best friends with whom they have strong connections," Russell said in a college news release.

He also discovered that children "have a distinct sense of existential fairness around whether or not an animal lived until an appropriate age."

For example, the children said a short lifespan is normal for pets such as fish and hamsters but not for dogs, cats or rabbits.

"Children whose pets lived the extent of their potential lifetimes—or beyond—expressed acceptance upon their deaths," while they described the unexpected death of a pet as "emotionally and morally unfair, and had a much more difficult time reconciling the loss," Russell said.

He also found that the children believed euthanasia "was the moral thing to do when a pet is suffering."

In all the cases, family and friends helped the children cope with the loss of their pets through discussions and family rituals.

The [children](#) had different views on whether a new pet would ease their grief.

"There were those who felt it would be wrong to move on to a new pet because they had to honor their relationships with the deceased one, while others "explicitly linked getting a new pet with feeling better," Russell said.

"They explained it as an opportunity to start over and suggested that replacing a companion animal is more about beginning a new relationship than erasing memories of an old one."

More information: The American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry explains how to [talk to children about the death of a pet](#).

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