



The D-word

Help for dealing with a pet's death

BY RACHEL NAUD

"GIVE HROTHGAR A HUG and kiss before you leave for school," I said to my then six-year-old son, Tristan, while choking back tears. "He doesn't feel well."

I watched my son carefully sit beside the dog, who lay fast asleep on his bed. He gently stroked Hrothgar's fur, and kissed his head before whispering in his ear, "See ya later, buddy. I hope you feel better soon."

It was heartbreaking.

What my son didn't know was that in an hour I would be driving our 12-and-a-half-year-old wheaten terrier to the vet to be euthanized. While part of me wanted to tell him what was about to happen, all I could envision was him pleading with me not to do it in a tear-stricken panic, or begging to go with me. Better to deal with it later, I thought.

Not so, says Shiri Joshua, a Toronto-based psychotherapist specializing in the human-animal bond, including bereavement, who says children this age understand that when something dies, it means it will not return. If possible, have family time beforehand to give kids a chance to say goodbye to their pet. "Explain to your children that Fluffy is very old or is very sick," says Joshua, adding it's okay to let your child know that Fluffy is not enjoying his life anymore and that you are helping him to no longer suffer.

talking about death

Many parents use euphemisms when explaining a pet's death to their children, but Joshua says we aren't doing them any favours. "Use the words 'die' and 'death,'" she says, adding that phrases such as "put to sleep" can confuse or even frighten a child who may take the term literally. "And don't use 'put down,'" says Joshua. "That doesn't register well. What does that even mean?"

It's important not to lie either. "It is not sufficient simply to say 'Rex has disappeared,' or 'We lost Rex,'" says Brien Thurston, a grief counsellor and executive director and founder of Pet Loss Canada in Kitchener, Ont. "Because guess what that child will do? He will look for his pet."

When it comes to hearing about the process of death, you know your child best, says Joshua. "From research and experience, developmentally speaking, most kids are ready. But if your child is showing signs of withdrawing or acting out, try asking

him to draw a picture or make art to express how he feels," she says. "It's another way of opening up the conversation and allowing him to feel the process about the cycle of life without telling him exactly what happened."

If a pet is euthanized, Joshua says parents should be prepared to answer tough questions. "If they are curious about what happened (at the vet office) and are opening up the conversation, they are ready to hear about it," says Joshua. "You don't have to get too detailed, but tell your child that the vet is going to give your pet an injection. It won't feel the injection and it will be as if they are going to sleep but the pet is actually going to die." While this may seem a little harsh, Joshua says it's better than sugar-coating the situation or lying to your child about what happened to his pet.

Though the signs of grief—which may include crying and not eating or sleeping well—tend not to last as long in children as they do in adults, Thurston stresses that it depends on the individual and his environment. "There are considerably more variables with children, which include such things as parental support, relationships with family and friends and the child's personal understanding of dying and death," he says.

"Will they cry and have all the heartbreak that goes with losing someone? Absolutely. But a child can learn from that experience," says Thurston, adding that they will develop a better understanding of death. "It becomes less scary."

saying goodbye

Thurston, who hosts group and individual grief counselling sessions, asks his participants to write a letter to their animal, something he suggests that with strong parental support may be therapeutic for some children. "It's gut-wrenching, but it helps," he says, adding that the child could also draw a picture representing the fun times he had with his pet or write a story about a certain funny incident they shared.

These pictures and stories can later be shared during a family memorial service or celebration of the pet's life. "It's a wonderful thing to do and it works," says Thurston. "It gives the child an opportunity to express how he feels."

Rachel Naud's son believes his dog is going to be reincarnated as a lion. He may just be right.