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Helping with Feelings of

By Marybeth Haines

Education and understanding what death is all about is essential to helping children heal and release



As a small child and after my grandmother died, I remember my poodle named Bo being at my side throughout this confusing time. I was still a little child and I had not yet seen a lot of loss, and Bo knew exactly what to do to help me feel better. I remember speaking to him about my feelings and he never interrupted. He sat

patiently while I stroked his fur as my family was hurrying about, organising things and feeling sad. I worked through that loss with Bo, who would lie on his back and want me to rub his tummy. Imagine that!

Bo wasn't stressed at all, but he was very intuitive. How did he know when to come up and get me out of

bed by pulling on my blanket with his teeth? He would run around chasing his tail and get me to laugh. The fact is that dogs are a child's best friend. If Bo could have worn a nursing uniform like my grandmother had, no one would have flinched, because Bo was my nurse and he helped the hurt go away after the loss of my Grandma.

Guilt

Dogs are
a child's
best friend



DEALING WITH GUILT

Over the years, I've been given many tools to help others heal from the loss of a loving pet. My knowledge has come from personal experience as well as education. During my training and certification with Pet Loss Grief and Companioning, I had the opportunity to further develop my understanding of how children handle grief and the ways we can support them on their healing journey. Children may feel responsible for a dog's death.

Perhaps a beloved dog ran away while under their care. A child can accidentally leave a gate open. As a child on our beautiful hobby farm, I remember when I forgot to close the rabbit cage properly and we lost our beautiful bunny. My dad talked me through my feelings of guilt and I truly believe that this experience has helped me help other children.

One of the main topics I have expanded my knowledge upon was the topic of a child's expression and internal processing of guilt. It's important that we as parents, caregivers and support systems give children the tools they require in order to heal. I've often been told children are resilient and I believe that they are. I believe children come into this world and if they are given the proper guidance, can thrive under great stress. Everything may seem new to a young child and often an experience can stick with the child until their adult life. Take the time to allow children to express themselves through talking, drawing pictures and asking questions. The cycle of life and death can be difficult to understand for adults! Let's look at some practical steps to

take when guilt may be present in a child's mind after the loss of their dog.

Event Example #1 – A dog has run out of the house, onto the road and is hit, resulting in death

Tool of Guidance: Talk with your children. Explain why their pet has died and open the floor to how they are feeling about this loss. Listen to how they respond. What is going on in their minds?

In this example of a traumatic death, your child could be feeling anger, guilt or responsible. Does your child feel guilty for this loss? The lesson here could be accepting that, sometimes, sad things happen that are out of our control. Accidents do happen, we feel badly and often we need to accept responsibility. If we did leave the gate open accidentally, then it's time to feel sorry for a while; however, would your pet want you to hurt for a long amount of time? Would your pet forgive you? Your dog wouldn't want you to suffer. Even grown-ups make mistakes. You may wish to speak about your own experiences as a child, when you felt feelings of guilt after a loss. Expressing how you felt as a child can be very soothing. It's time to allow the child to release any feelings that are settling inside of them.

Now it's time to do something proactive. You and your child can talk about what you will do next time to ensure the safety of a pet. You can talk about setting up a barrier or gate so a dog doesn't go near a doorway when it's open. As a family, you can honour your pet's death and remember the many happy times

you shared with them. Through educating the child on how to protect your dog, you can ensure the safety of the future dogs coming into the family.

Event Example #2 – A pet died from an illness and was euthanised

Tool of Guidance: If your dog became ill and you felt it was in their best interest to be euthanised, then it's important to share these reasons with your child. You can explain that "Fido" was in pain, wasn't eating anymore and you didn't want her to suffer. Fido wouldn't want to suffer either. Euthanasia in my eyes is a gift we can give to our furry family member so that they don't suffer. Listen to how your child responds. Do you sense that there is something that your child does not want to talk about, or is your child taking themselves away from the family unit for long periods of time?

Now is the time to take action and communicate with your child/children. Explaining how the cycle of life works and how dogs as a rule do not live as long as humans do is a good way to begin the discussion. These conversations will create the framework for the child to continue to work through the subject of loss through their adult years. It is important to remember to use correct words when explaining death by euthanasia. Instead of saying "put to sleep", use the word "euthanasia". You can explain what this means by saying, "it's a special drug that will stop life," or "it's a special medicine that will take away the pain and to stop the breathing." You can speak about how you wanted to help Fido. You didn't want her to die in pain



and because her body was already dying, the veterinarian gave her this medicine which took her pain away and helped her die so she could feel peace.

If your child is feeling guilt from their dog's passing, work hand in hand with your child to release feelings through educating them on how we don't have the control over how long a dog, or person for that matter, lives and that it's not our fault. Often a child may think "what if?" or "if only I had...." Help children understand their grief or guilt through drawing pictures with coloured pencils or putting up a picture of "Fido" and bringing in stones, leaves, flowers or shells to honour their pet and say thank you. When you feel the time is right, put all of these treasures into a special box and set it away so that your child can open it when they need to feel closure or closeness to their beloved pet.

Event Example #3 – A pet has died from old age

Tool of Guidance: If your pet has died from old age, you may wish to use this time to explain that living beings do not live forever. For many children, the death of a pet is the first time they will experience death and dying. How adults help them deal with this loss may very well affect how they view death in the future.

I remember my dad and mom taking us out as a family to our back field. We lived on a farm and had a special place reserved called our "pet cemetery". We would go out to this area and bury our dogs and pets. My father offered the opportunity for each of us to say a few words, to cry, sing or share. While growing up, this

tradition helped me realise that although death was frightening to me, I could process it and almost receive the death in a positive way.

Through my experiences as a child who was allowed to express their grief or guilt, I believe I have a better understanding of death and dying today.

If guilt is being felt by your child after their dog passes on, it's okay to tell them that they are feeling normal feelings that even you yourself may be experiencing. Help your child understand that they are not alone in their grief; however, if they put the blame on themselves, is that going to help anyone? It's time to release the bad feelings and replace them with good memories of their dog, their friend, and their companion.

FEELINGS ARE HEALTHY

Implementing the strategies mentioned above can be helpful when feelings of guilt are present in children. Many times when a child doesn't fully understand what has happened, they can begin to experience feelings of guilt. Education and understanding what death is all about is essential to helping children heal and release. Death is a big subject; however, step-by-step we learn how to cope.

Remember, this is a time when you are also healing. You do not need to be perfect. If you feel sadness, you can share this with your child and heal together. When a child sees a mom or dad feeling sad, it gives them the message that it's okay for them to be sad too. Feelings are healthy. Take your time to express yourself and listen. You may be surprised to receive comforting feelings of hope from your child. Some of the best advice I've heard

has from come children and THAT brings me hope. 🐶



About the writer: Marybeth Haines empowers people to make choices that promote action, personal growth and healing. She is an author, speaker, consultant and grief specialist from Ontario, Canada. She is a wife, sister, daughter and a mother to her furry children with tails and whiskers. Marybeth is the author of "The Power of Pets – 7 Effective Tools To Heal From Pet Loss" and "From Empty To Empowered – A Journey To Healing From Unexpected Pet Loss". In 2012, she founded the "I Believe In The Power of Pets" movement. Her focus is teaching proven step-by-step strategies in reinforcing the bond and connection between pets and people.

Her books are available on Amazon.com or via her website. For a limited time, Marybeth is giving away FREE copies of her book at: www.author-marybethhaines.com. There is no obligation or anything to buy when receiving this book. All that is required is a request and your book will be electronically delivered to you right away.