

HARBOURSIDE

PET & EQUINE CREMATIONS

FOR FAMILIES

How To Talk To Children About Losing a Pet

Age-by-age guidance for parents, guardians & teachers



INSIDE THIS GUIDE

- Words to use / words to avoid
- Age-by-age guidance (under 5 to teens)
- Should a child be present at the end?
- Rituals that help children remember
- When to seek extra help

5 PAGES

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Written for the families we sit with.

0466 566 979

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Before you tell them

Children can cope with sad news. What they cannot cope with well is confusion, or discovering later that they were not told the truth. Tell them early, tell them simply, and be ready to tell them again in a week when the question comes back.

Choose a quiet moment at home rather than in the car or at the school gate, and make sure there is nothing they have to do straight afterwards.

WORDS TO USE

- “Died”, “death”, “body”, “stopped working”.
- “Her body was very sick and it stopped working, and she died this morning.”
- “It is nobody’s fault. Nothing you did or said made this happen.”
- “It is okay to feel sad. It is okay to not feel sad yet. Both are normal.”
- “You can ask me anything about it, any time.”

WORDS TO AVOID

- “Went to sleep” — young children may become frightened of sleep, or of anaesthetics.
- “We lost him” — taken literally, this suggests he could be found.
- “Put down” or “put to sleep” without explanation.
- “He went away” or “she went to live on a farm” — this almost always unravels badly.
- “Don’t cry” or “be brave for Mum”.

Age by age

UNDER 5

Death is not yet understood as permanent. Expect the same question repeatedly over weeks — this is not distress, it is a child re-testing the fact. Keep answers short and identical each time. Play is how they process; do not be alarmed if the topic appears in games.

AGES 5 TO 8

Now understood as permanent, but often with magical thinking attached: a belief that a wish, a thought, or a bad behaviour caused it. Say clearly and more than once that nothing they did caused this. Concrete facts help — where the body is, what will happen next.

AGES 9 TO 12

Curious, sometimes clinically so, about the biology and the details. Answer honestly. They may worry about the mortality of parents and of themselves, and may hide grief to protect you. Give them a job in the goodbye if they want one.

TEENAGERS

Often the hardest hit and the least visible. A pet is frequently a teenager's confidant through years they did not talk to anyone else. Grief may look like anger, withdrawal, or hours in a bedroom. Do not force conversation; be present, be available, and drive them somewhere — side-by-side in a car is where teenagers talk.

Should a child be present at the end?

There is no single right answer. In general:

- A child who asks to be there, and who has been told plainly what will happen, usually copes well.
- A child who does not want to be there should never be made to.
- Under about five, presence at euthanasia is rarely helpful; a goodbye beforehand usually is.
- Being able to see the body afterwards, briefly and with warning, helps many children believe it.
- Whatever you decide, tell them the plan in advance. Surprise is what hurts.

RITUALS THAT HELP

- Drawing a picture to send along with them.
- Choosing a flower, or writing a note to tuck in.
- A candle at dinner on the first night, and on birthdays afterwards.
- A memory jar the whole family adds slips of paper to for a year.
- Planting something and being the one responsible for watering it.
- A photo of their own for the bedroom, chosen by them.

When to seek extra help

Most children find their way through with time and family. Speak to your GP or the school counsellor if, beyond three or four weeks, you see:

- Sleep or appetite badly disrupted, or a return to bed-wetting.
- Refusal to go to school, or a marked drop in schoolwork.
- Persistent belief that they caused the death.
- Withdrawal from friends and from things they normally love.
- Any talk of self-harm or of wanting to die — seek help immediately.

FREE SUPPORT IN AUSTRALIA

- Kids Helpline — 1800 55 1800 — free, 24/7, ages 5 to 25.
- Lifeline — 13 11 14 — 24/7 crisis support.
- Beyond Blue — 1300 22 4636.
- GriefLine — 1300 845 745.
- Your GP can write a Mental Health Care Plan for subsidised sessions.