Pets touch our lives and give those lives meaning. Too often children and adults are discounted for the great love they feel for their pet, and the deep sorrow experienced when that pet is very ill or dies” (Lucy Let’s Go, Goldman, 2014).

Pet death may sometimes be discounted as not important, and those undermining words “we’ll get you another one” are offered as a hollow consolation. The message they give can diminish the love the child has for the pet, whether it is a goldfish, hamster, dog, cat or horse. The death of a pet can serve as a teachable moment to include children as recognized mourners. It can prepare them for other deaths or losses that will occur in their lives.

THE STORY OF SAMANTHA
Samantha was Jasmine’s dog. She was hit by a car and severely injured with no chance of recovery, while Jasmine, a first grader, was at school. She came home, her dog was gone and her mom was in tears. Jasmine needed to understand what happened to Samantha. Mom explained she was hurt so badly and was suffering so much that the vet had to “put her to sleep.” Jasmine began to worry. If I go to sleep, I might not come back. Jasmine knew Samantha was dead, yet, she still wondered if she would wake up soon and come back home. Mother explained, “No, Samantha can’t come back from the dead. Death and sleep are not the same.”
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There are many ways to help Jasmine grieve. When Jasmine sees her mom’s sadness looking at Samantha’s favorite ball, she serves as a role model of love and permission to cry. Kids also need explanations of what has happened so that missing pieces won’t be filled in with their own unrealistic imagination and interpretation. Young children should be given the simplest information possible while still sharing needed facts for their growth. How did Samantha die? What did the vet do? Who took her to the vet? Did she cry? Where did her body go? Can I see her? These questions are useful to answer. Caring adults can respond by saying, “Samantha won’t be back. We won’t see her again. Her body has gone. Mom said they gave his dog to a new home.” Jasmine needed to work through the loss of her dog, to understand and commemorate her dog’s death, she will be able to express her grief into life again.

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Jasmine can commemorate Samantha’s death informally or with a real ceremony. As long as she is involved, if she chooses to be, she will be able to express her grief. In this way, hiding from the reality of the value of the life that was Samantha’s, Jasmine decided to invite her family, friends and two pet dogs in the neighborhood. She read poetry, played music and planted flowers as a tribute. She put a picture of her and Samantha by her bed to help remember her.

Once Jasmine had understood, grieved and commemorated her dog’s death, she may feel more ready to “go on.” This readiness to start life again, to play with other dogs or start a new activity, shows that missing pieces won’t be filled in with their own unrealistic imagination. When Jasmine sees her mom’s grief experiences with Samantha can informally or with a real ceremony. These two stories on pet loss or death needs to be acknowledged as an integral part of grieving and healing.

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The death of a pet can serve as a teachable moment to allow children to be recognized mourners. By including children in memorializing, this death can also prepare young people for other losses or deaths they will experience growing up. Girls and boys can actively participate by making a collage of pictures of Ginger’s life, Sally and her 10-year-old brother Matthew created a puppet show about Ginger. Their parents took pictures of the celebration. Everyone shared memories about Ginger. Sally sang a song about how much she loved her. Matthew wrote Ginger a letter that said, “I love you Ginger for being with me and protecting my family.” This celebration of Ginger’s life provided children and adults an avenue to say goodbye.

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A TEACHABLE MOMENT

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Including children in memorializing:

The following are practical ways children can celebrate a pet’s life. By becoming active participants, children can be included as part of the grief community.

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- Write a letter or play
- Plant flowers
- Bury a bone
- Share a poem
- Blow bubbles
- Create a memory book, box or table
- Buy a pet bone
- Send off a balloon
- Make a tape recording or video

Common pet cliches that inhibit grief:

Often adults share familiar cliches that can be harmful and inhibit the grief process. Jasmine can minimize a child’s love for their pet and the deep feelings associated with that love.

- “It’s just a dog. We will get you another one.”
- “It’s just a hamster. Get over it.”
- “Your cat was dying. They had to put her to sleep.”
- “Don’t be a baby and cry. It’s not a person.”
- “Your doggie was so old. She lived a long life. You shouldn’t be sad.”
- “Time to move on. It’s been a few weeks.” (“Lucy Let’s Go,” Goldman, 2014).

RESOURCES FOR CHILDREN ABOUT PET LOSS AND DEATH


RESOURCES FOR ADULTS TO HELP CHILDREN WITH PET LOSS


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Linda Goldman has worked as a teacher, guidance counselor, and grief counselor for the past 25 years. She is the author of “Life and Loss,” 3rd Edition; “Lucy Let’s Go,” 2nd Edition; “Teaching Our Children to Be Resilient”; “Great Answers to Difficult Questions About Death,” and “Children Also Grieve.” She has authored an “Adolescent Grief Education” at many schools including, John Hopkins University, King's College and George Washington University. Linda has served on the board of The Association for Death Education and Counseling (ADEC), the advisory board of Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) and Suicide Prevention Education Awareness for Kids (SPARK). She was the recipient of the ADEC Clinical Practice Award and the Tenfold Global Concern of Human Life Award.