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How to help children come to terms with a pet's death

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Losing a pet can be traumatic for a child, but providing the chance to grieve and a dignified send-off can help them cope

A self-confessed overachiever who is rarely fazed by anything, banker Stephanie Taylor says her world was turned upside down earlier this year following the death of a beloved family pet.

"It was such a shock - I was totally unprepared for the emotional fallout I'd experience and for how it would affect my children," says Taylor, who has two daughters, aged four and six.

Their seven-year-old rescue dog was run over by a car while on a walk in Pok Fu Lam. "I was with my youngest daughter, who also witnessed it, so that was really traumatic for her," Taylor says.

"We had planned to take the dog to Melbourne when we moved home later this year. I told the girls we'd have to be apart from the dog for a while during its stay in quarantine and they were upset at that prospect, so this was very tough to deal with.

"The dog grew up with us ... she was there through all the girls' ups and downs - she would follow them everywhere. I wish I had done some homework on the subject [of losing a pet]."

Taylor sought advice online and from a child psychologist friend on how to best deal with the situation.

It became a catalyst for a "rather overdue" conversation with her children on the subject of death.

Bereavement counsellor Rashidah Mootee says the loss of a pet can be traumatic for the whole family, especially children who "do not yet fully understand the concept of death".

Mootee says failure to deal with a child's grief associated with the loss of a pet could have long-term repercussions. Instead of using euphemisms, saying the pet has "gone somewhere else to live" or "gone to sleep", she says parents should try to explain the meaning of death to the child.

"For a child to heal, it's important they face the grief. Parents should encourage their child to express their feelings rather than bottle them up. Grief is a natural reaction to loss - it's painful and stressful but also normal and necessary. Unfortunately, society still doesn't widely accept the grieving of a pet so it can be difficult for pet owners - adults and children - to find emotional support."

Children's grief can take many forms including aggression, resentment or social withdrawal. But time is the best healer, Mootee

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says. "Parents should closely monitor their child's bereavement symptoms, and gradually involve the child in various enjoyable activities."

Their dog's death presented Taylor with another issue - how to dispose of the body. The family eventually had their pet cremated and the ashes scattered at sea. "Growing up, pets were buried in the garden of the family home," says Taylor.

But in Hong Kong, where space is a scarce commodity, cremation is the most common option.

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Rashidah Mootee, bereavement counsellor



"Almost 90 per cent of owners arrange private cremations for their pet," says Iris Chan Pik-Yan of Hong Kong Pet Memorial.

Located in a spacious Kowloon building, Hong Kong Pet Memorial has been offering pet after-care services for five years. When a pet dies, the company collects the remains from the vet or the owner's home and then cleans and sterilises the body.

"The owners can choose whether they would like to view their pet before the cremation. We'll arrange a 30-minute private viewing session so they can say goodbye. After the viewing, the cremation will take place," says Chan.

Ashes are collected and placed in a biodegradable urn and returned to the owners. The company can also make keepsakes, from paw-print jewellery to glass bead bracelets that contain ashes or bones of a pet.

Some owners opt to place the ashes at the pet memorial's columbarium, a bright, shelf-lined room in the premises. It is a peaceful setting, designed for people to visit and reflect on times shared with their pet.

Others may choose another programme to have the ashes delivered to an organic farm "to give new life", Chan says.

To prepare people for pet ownership, Hong Kong Pet Memorial also offers life education programmes.

"Schoolchildren and NGOs can visit. We talk about life and the value of a pet, and participants can experience the private cremation process by playing the role of pet owner. We also share some of the cases we have come across, letting them know that keeping a pet is a life-long process, and how to care for it when it's healthy and when it's sick.

"Most importantly, we teach people to treat a pet with respect and dignity."

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