

2008

## Experiencing pet loss as a child: A parental perspective

Sarah Jayne Parkin  
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Experiencing Pet Loss as a Child: A Parental Perspective

Sarah Jayne Parkin

A report submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Award of Bachelor of Arts

(Psychology) Honours, Faculty of Computing, Health and Science

Edith Cowan University

Submitted (October, 2008)

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Running head: PET LOSS

## Experiencing Pet Loss as a Child: A Parental Perspective

Sarah Jayne Parkin

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## Experiencing Pet Loss as a Child: A Parental Perspective

### Abstract

Due to the positive contributions many companion animals make to the lives of others, it is common for individuals to build strong emotional attachments to their pets. Individuals who have strong relationships with their pets are likely to experience an equally strong grief reaction following their death. Although the grief process is highly idiosyncratic, theory suggests common stages or tasks that adults progress through during grief. However, research indicates that the grief process for children may vary from that of adults. The developmental capability of a child at the time of a loss will determine their level of understanding about death and consequently influence their reactions and use of coping strategies in response to the death of a loved one. Although research has explored the grief process in children, the majority of studies focus on human death, therefore future research should aim to explore the experiences of children following the death of a pet.

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Dr Deirdre Drake

August 25<sup>th</sup> 2008

## Experiencing Pet Loss as a Child: A Parental Perspective

### Introduction

The presence of a companion animal in the average Australian home is quite common (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2006). Pets may play the role of protector, helper or surrogate child within the families with which they reside (Toray, 2004). However, most commonly companion animals serve as friends and providers of unconditional love and affection (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988). Research has indicated that bonds between humans and their pets are often as strong as, and sometimes stronger than, relationships with other humans (Sharkin & Knox, 2003). As a result, the grief experienced by those who lose a pet may be intense and long-lasting (Gage & Holcomb, 1991). Grief can be defined as a multi-faceted response to a loss (Ross & Baron-Sorenson, 2007). Although grief usually occurs following the death of a loved one, it may also occur as a result of other forms of separation (Sife, 2005). Grief is a complex experience which involves not only an emotional reaction, but may also include physical, cognitive, behavioural, and social responses (Harvey, 2007). It may be common for individuals to repress their grief following the loss of a pet due to fear that others will fail to acknowledge such a loss as significant (Donohue, 2005).

Although researchers are beginning to acknowledge the significance of grief following the loss of a pet, further attention is needed in relation to the experiences of children (Archer & Winchester, 1994). It is likely that a child's experience following the death of a pet will vary from the experience of an adult in the same situation (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2006). A child's ability to understand the concept of death increases as they mature, therefore each child may experience grief differently due to variances in their developmental level (Oltjenbruns, 2001). Consequently, it is important to explore the experiences of children surrounding the loss of a pet

in order to better understand the process of pet grieving for a child. The following literature review will begin by discussing research regarding the importance of companion animals and the extent of the human-animal bond that may occur between an individual and their pet. Research exploring the experiences of adults following the death of a pet will then be examined, followed by the research addressing the experiences of grief for children. The review will then conclude with a summary of the discussed literature and recommendations for future research.

### Importance of Companion Animals

To some, companion animals are considered to play a variety of significant roles in western society. Animals, such as dogs, have been used to assist individuals with disabilities, hasten recovery from illness, and aid in protection (Barker, Rogers, Turner, Karpf, & Suthers-McCabe, 2003). Companion animals may also serve as a source of support, comfort, safety or security for individuals and their families (Sharkin & Bahrack, 1990). However, the most common role such animals play within western societies is that of the family pet (Sable, 1995). In 2006, the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that 85% of primary school children had a family pet. A survey completed by 13,000 families found that the majority reported pets as significant members of their families (Sussman, 1985). The families surveyed also reported on perceived benefits of owning a pet, including increased development of children, improved family wellbeing and the teaching of compassion in the family home (Sussman). According to Melson (2003), the act of caring for companion animals may enhance the cognitive, social and emotional development of children. Observing and assisting in the care of animals may broaden children's conceptual understanding of the life cycle (Melson, 2003). It is also believed that caring for a pet may not only assist children to understand the life cycle, but also to better understand relationships.

Companion animals are often viewed by children as significant members of the family, somewhat similar to siblings (Corr, 2003-2004). A series of interviews with adolescents who had previously lost a pet, demonstrated the significance of relationships that may occur between a child and their pet (Brown, Richards, & Wilson, 1996). The majority of adolescents interviewed perceived their pets as close companions with whom they could share experiences and seek comfort. The act of growing up with a pet, being able to play and learn together, as well as share with and care for each other, often leads to the development of strong bonds between a child and their pet (Brown et al.) By taking a role in the nurturance of a companion animal, such as feeding and walking, a child also learns about fulfilling the needs of others, therefore developing empathy (Melson, 2003). According to Sable (1995), the emotional wellbeing of a child and their ability to form future attachments is influenced by early personal relationships, such as those with the family pet. On the basis of John Bowlby's Attachment Theory, children who build significant attachments with pets are more likely to build successful attachments in adolescence and adulthood (Holmes, 1993). Therefore, the development of children may be accelerated through the observation of and interaction with a companion animal.

### The Human-Animal Bond

It is the nature of human beings to seek meaningful relationships with others, not just with fellow humans but also with companion animals. The 'human-animal bond' refers to the emotional attachment and feelings of affection shared by an individual and their companion animal (Toray, 2004). Various theoretical models may be useful for understanding the human-animal bond, however John Bowlby's Attachment Theory seems most appropriate as it focuses not only on childhood, but also on how the events in childhood influence adulthood (Holmes, 1993). According to the Attachment Theory humans naturally build strong attachments to

individuals who are sensitive to and satisfy their needs (Holmes). In classical attachment theory, the initial and often strongest attachment an individual develops is to their mother, as she is perceived to be the sole provider and satisfier of all needs (Holmes). However, as children grow they begin to develop attachments to others who may also satisfy these needs (Sable, 1995). This may include attachments to companion animals, who often serve as providers of affection, comfort, safety and security to their human companions (Sussman, 1985). Furthermore, the act of caring for an animal may also satisfy the human need to be needed (Sable). Companion animals have also been known to benefit humans by increasing life satisfaction, reducing isolation or reducing the impact of disabilities (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988). As a result, it is common for strong attachments to develop between a human and their companion animal as they share their lives and gratify each others needs.

Although many individuals build strong attachments to their pets, the extent of the human-animal bond may vary depending on certain factors (Toray, 2004). According to Toray, the likelihood of an individual developing a relationship with a pet depends on the personal qualities of that animal. Research suggest that humans may be more likely to develop attachments to animals that display infantile qualities (neoteny), human-like personalities (anthropomorphism) or mimic human-like behaviour (alleomemetic). Interviews with 612 pet owners indicated that dogs were recognised as displaying more anthropomorphic and alleomemetic qualities compared to other types of pets (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988). It was also found that participants with pet dogs scored higher on attachment scales compared to individuals with other pets. The presence of a pet during significant life transitions may also lead to the development of strong attachments (Sharkin & Knox, 2003). An individual may be more likely to develop a strong relationship with a companion animal that was present, providing comfort and support, during significant

transitions such as divorce, childhood or the death of a loved one (Sharkin & Knox). Therefore, although many individuals build close relationships with their pets, attachment may vary depending on characteristics of a pet and the circumstances surrounding the relationship.

### Grief Reactions of Adults Following the Death of a Pet

As previously mentioned, grief can be defined as the multi-faceted response to a loss (Sife, 2005). Research surrounding pet loss has explored different types of grief, as well as various courses of grief and common reactions to the death of a pet. Research has also identified that various factors may influence the type, course and reactions of grief that occur in response to pet loss. According to Toray (2004) there are five different types of grief: normal grief, disenfranchised grief, complicated grief, anticipatory grief and discrepant grief. The type of grief experienced by an individual following the death of pet may depend on the circumstances surrounding the loss. Disenfranchised grief is more intense than normal grief and may occur due to lack of social acknowledgement of the significance of a loss. Complicated grief is often an excessive representation of usual reactions to death, it includes continued denial of the loss, repression, and an inability to let go (Toray, 2004). If the death of an individual or pet is expected then anticipatory grief may occur, involving a grief reaction prior to the loss as well as following it (Rando, 1995). Discrepant grief arises when differences occur between individual coping styles, which may cause relationship conflicts between family or friends (Toray). In relation to normal grief, the most popular theory regarding its process is the Five Stages of Grief Theory by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969). In this theory Kübler-Ross states that individuals move through five stages of grief following the death of a loved one: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Although the theory outlines a step-by-step experience of grief, the stages vary in time and may overlap (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Criticisms surrounding the five stages

theory include the argument that not all individuals will grieve in a step-by-step process, rather they may grieve back and forth between stages or even miss stages completely (Harvey, 2007). As a result, additional theories have since been developed exploring the grief process further.

According to Dr J. William Worden (1991) there are four tasks of mourning to be achieved before one can 'move on with life' following the death of a loved one. These tasks include accepting the reality of loss, working through the pain of separation, adjusting to a changed environment without the loved one and emotionally relocating the deceased (Worden, 1991). The Four Tasks of Mourning Theory states that an individual must move through these tasks, not in any particular order, before reaching a point where they are able to accept the loss and continue with their life (Worden). Dr Therese Rando has further built on this concept to develop the Six Processes of Mourning Model (Harvey, 2007). In this model it is perceived that following the death of a loved one an individual must recognise the reality of the loss, react by expressing their grief, re-experience the deceased, relinquish old attachments to the deceased and readjust to the new situation before they are able to reinvest in their life (Harvey). However, despite continuing research no uniform process of grieving has been identified, rather grief appears to be an idiosyncratic experience which varies considerably depending on the circumstances surrounding the loss.

Although grief is an individualised process, there are a range of common reactions which occur in the period following the death of a pet. According to Archer and Winchester (1994) these may include emotions such as anger, guilt, anxiety, sadness and hopelessness. However, individuals may also experience numbness, disbelief, irritability, longing for the deceased and depression following the death of a beloved pet. Adolescents in a study conducted by Brown, Richards, and Wilson (1996) described their most predominant feelings following the death of a

pet as overwhelming sadness, anger and disbelief. Individuals have also been known to experience disturbances in daily routines, such as eating and sleeping, as well as a reduction in time spent socialising (Clements, Benasuti, & Carmone, 2003). During the grieving process following the death of a pet, individuals may also seek time away from work or school (McCutcheon & Fleming, 2001-2002). Such experiences are comparable to those which occur following the death of a fellow human (Roach & Nieto, 1997). The previously discussed theories based on research regarding human grief over human loss, include many of the emotions and behaviours which have been demonstrated to occur following the death of a pet (Harvey, 2007). Therefore, it is possible for an individual to experience similar grief reactions following the death of a pet as they may following a human death.

The extent of a grief response following the death of a pet may be influenced by the context in which the death occurs. As with human loss, the intensity of ones grief following a death is strongly predicted by the extent of the relationship between the individual and the deceased (Jarolmen, 1998). A study conducted by Archer and Winchester (1994) explored the experiences of 88 individuals who had lost a pet in the previous year, via interview. The interview questions were developed based on Kübler-Ross's Five Stages of Grief, and were scored in order to calculate an overall grief score. The results indicated a positive correlation between emotional attachment to the pet and the overall grief score, indicating that the stronger the relationship between an individual and their pet, the stronger the grief reaction is likely to be. A study exploring the experiences of adolescents who had lost a pet in the previous year found similar results (Brown, Richards, & Wilson, 1996). The participants completed the Companion Animal Bonding Scale to assess their relationship with their pet, and the Texas Revised Inventory of Grief to determine their reaction to the loss. It was found that adolescents with

stronger bonds to their pets, experienced stronger grief reactions following their death compared to adolescents with lesser bond to their pets. Therefore, the previous research indicates that the strength of the human-animal bond may be a significant predictor of the intensity of grief following the death of a pet.

The manner in which a pet dies may also influence an individual's reaction to the loss. A study conducted by McCutcheon and Fleming (2001-2002) compared the experiences of individuals who had lost pets due to natural causes to those who had lost pets as a result of euthanasia. Comparisons of Grief Experience Inventory scores indicated a significant difference between the experiences of both groups. Owners of pets who died naturally were found to have higher grief scores and reported greater social isolation and lack of control compared to those who euthanized their pets (McCutcheon & Fleming, 2001-2002). Individuals who decide to euthanize their pets may be able to prepare for the loss, and may therefore react less intensely compared to those who lose their pets unexpectedly (Wrobel & Dye, 2003). As was found by Archer and Winchester (1994) the sudden death of a pet tends to result in a significantly stronger grief reaction compared to the reaction following the death of a pet from natural causes (old age) or euthanasia. The experience of traumatic deaths, such as a pet being hit by a car, may also be more difficult to cope with compared to a death of natural cause or euthanasia (Cohen, Mannarino, Greenberg, Padlo, & Shipley, 2002). Therefore, the experience of an individual following the death of a pet may be influenced by whether their pet died as a result of natural causes, an accident or euthanasia.

Although many individuals build strong relationships with their pets, the death of a pet may still be considered somewhat insignificant by others. The support available to an individual during their period of grief may influence how they cope with the loss of their pet (Weisman,

1990-1991). Social norms for grieving the loss of a pet do not exist as they do for the loss of a human. As a result people may feel unsure about expressing their grief openly due to fear such grief will be considered abnormal (Donohue, 2005). A study conducted by Weisman explored the perceptions of support following the death of a pet during free counselling sessions for those who had lost a pet in the past. Most individuals reported that following the death of their pet they received little support from family, friends and co-workers. Overall, most individuals felt that the significance of the loss of a pet was not acknowledged by people around them, therefore they felt uncomfortable discussing or displaying their grief openly (Weisman). According to Toray (2004) the inability to grieve openly may result in disenfranchised grief, complicated grief, or discrepant grief. All of which may be more intense and long-lasting than normal grief (Toray, 2004). Therefore, the amount of social support and acknowledgement received following the death of a pet may influence the extent or nature of the grief experienced by an individual.

Although the grief experienced following the loss of any animal may be intense, research suggests that the death of some types of pets are more likely to elicit strong grief reactions than others. Surveys completed by 242 couples who had lost a pet in the previous three years indicated that the death of a pet dog was rated as more disturbing than the loss of other pets such as fish, mice or rabbits (Gage & Holcomb, 1991). Individuals who had experienced the death of a cat also reported higher levels of disturbance than those who had lost smaller animals, but not as high as those who had lost dogs. Telephone interviews with 612 pet owners also found that those individuals with dogs scored higher on attachment scales than those with other pets, and consequently also reported stronger grief reactions following their death (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988). This may be explained by the perception of human-like personalities of dogs and cats which assist to facilitate the development of strong emotional attachments (Archer &

Winchester, 1994), therefore resulting in a grief reaction comparable to that following the loss of a human.

The gender of a pet owner may also influence the likelihood of the development of a strong human-animal bond. A study conducted by McCutcheon and Fleming (2001-2002) found that female participants reported significantly higher attachments to their pets than their male partners. This may be accounted for by the greater need for females to nurture (maternal instinct) compared to males, which may lead to females becoming more attached to their companion animals (Holmes, 1993). In addition, females also reported stronger grief reactions and increased feelings of anxiety, despair and depersonalisation following the death of a pet compared to the males in the study (McCutcheon & Fleming, 2001-2002). Similarly, in a study conducted by Brown, Richards, and Wilson (1996), female adolescents were found to report not only stronger bonds with their pets but also more intense grief reactions following their death compared to male adolescents. According to Wrobel and Dye (2003) the duration of grief for females who have lost a pet may also be longer than the grief experienced by males. However, these differences which occur between the grief reactions of males and females may be due to variations in coping styles and perceptions of social norms (Wrobel & Dye, 2003). Although males may report lesser grief reactions, this may be more due to the belief that they should not express their emotions rather than the fact they actually feel less grief. Therefore, males and females may vary in the extent of the relationships they build with companion animals. As a result, grief reactions and coping strategies following their death may also vary.

The occurrence of external events surrounding the loss of a pet may also influence the extent of the grief reaction experienced by an individual. A series of in-depth case studies conducted by Margolies (1999) explored the experiences of three women following the death of

a pet. It was found that each woman reported close relationships with their pets and strong grief reactions following their death. However, two of the three women had also experienced significantly stressful events in the past twelve months prior to the loss of their pets, which influenced their reaction to the loss. For one woman, who had recently lost her mother, the reaction to the death of her cat was enhanced by the continuing grief over her mother's death. The second woman, who was in the process of a divorce, also reported intense grief following the death of her dog. It was also found that the women who had suffered significant stressful events prior to the death of their pet reported grief symptoms continuing for a longer period of time following the loss than the participant who did not (Margolies, 1999). Therefore, significant events prior to the death of a pet may influence the intensity or duration of the grief experienced.

Although the course of grief varies for each individual set of circumstances, research has attempted to identify the duration of normal grief following the death of a pet. A study conducted by Wrobel and Dye (2003) monitored 174 adults who had recently lost a dog or cat over an 18 month period. The range of grief symptoms reported included crying, depression, loneliness, guilt and preoccupation with the deceased. The results of the study concurred with previous research, indicating that the most significant predictor of strong, enduring grief symptoms was a strong attachment to the pet (Wrobel & Dye, 2003). It was found that symptoms were most intense during the first two weeks following the loss and gradually decreased in frequency after this period. However, some grief symptoms endured for a long period of time, as 35% of participants reported at least one grief symptom after six months, and 22% reported at least one grief symptom after one year. The average length of grief experienced due to the death of a pet was calculated to be 10 months, similar to the average 13 month period of grief following a human death (Shuchter & Zisook, 1994). However, it was found that although the majority of

symptoms eventually ceased 'timeless' emotions continued to reappear following the average grief period, particularly surrounding birthdays or anniversaries. Therefore, adults who lose a pet with whom they have a strong attachment may experience grief symptoms similar in intensity and duration to those experienced following the death of a human.

### The Experience of Grief for Children

In general, some evidence exists to suggest that the process of grieving for children is different to that of adults. Research surrounding grief experiences of children indicate that the level of understanding, reaction to loss and coping strategies employed may vary between not only children and adults, but also between children of different age groups. As children mature, their ability to understand the concept of death continues to expand (Deveau, 1995). However, young children often have little understanding of death and therefore do not mourn in the same way as adults (Black, 1996). A theory developed by Baker, Sedney, and Gross (1992) describes the grief process for children as a series of tasks. These tasks are grouped into three levels: early tasks, middle tasks and late tasks. The theory states that children must work through each level of tasks consecutively in order to reach a stage where they are able continue with normal life. The early tasks of grief consist of understanding that someone has died and ensuring self protection. These tasks may be achieved by asking numerous questions, observing others reactions, replicating such reactions and using denial, distortion or isolation to protect themselves from grief. The middle tasks involve acknowledging the reality of the loss, re-evaluating the relationship with the deceased and dealing with the emotional distress that result from acceptance of the death. It is during the late tasks that children must develop a new personal identity and learn to invest in new relationships without excessive fear of loss or comparison to the deceased. In order for this to occur children must establish a strong internal relationship with

the deceased. Following the completion of all previous tasks children are then able to resume the developmental course that was interrupted by grief and learn how to cope with continual feelings of grief that may arise in the future, such as on birthdays or anniversaries.

Although the task theory of grief for children is similar to Worden's (1991) Four Tasks of Mourning Theory for adults, there are some important differences between the two (Baker, Sedney, & Gross, 1992). According to Baker et al. the main reason children do not grieve in the same manner as adults is due to their developmental capabilities. Children may not be able to address certain tasks of grief until they have reached particular stages of development. For example, a child cannot understand nor accept that someone has died if they do not have the developmental capability to understand what death is. In order for children to address middle tasks, they must first be able to give up the notion that it is possible for the deceased to return. Therefore, it may be years following the death of a loved one before a child experiences the later tasks of grief, as they must wait until they are developmentally capable of achieving such tasks. Another difference that has been identified in the grieving process of adults and children, are the reactions of each group following the death of a loved one. According to Baker et al. children are more likely to experience denial, fear and anxiety in response to death compared to adults. Children are also likely to use their imagination to explain aspects of death they do not understand, possibly leading to inaccurate perceptions which may further influence their grief experiences (Baker et al.). Therefore, the grieving process for children may vary depending on the developmental level of the child at the time of the loss.

Young children, under the age of three, may not be developmentally mature enough to understand the meaning of death (Thomas, 2005). According to Sife (2005) although children three years and younger may not understand death they are likely to notice adult emotions in

response to loss, which they may respond to. For example, a child may be upset by a parent who is crying about the death of a pet. Children of this age will generally show little emotion following a death as they are not capable of understanding what it means (Mecurio & McNamee, 2006). As a result children under the age of three may willingly accept a replacement pet (Sife, 2005). Children who experience the death of a loved one between the ages of three and five years are likely to miss the deceased and be upset by the separation, but may not understand that death is permanent (Harvey, 2007). Children of this age are likely to compare death to sleep and may believe that although the deceased is not with them at that time they are able to return from death as they wish (Ross & Baron-Sorenson, 2007). Common reactions to death in children under the age of five may include regression in development, helplessness, guilt and repetition of questions about where the deceased has gone (Harvey). Children may also have dreams about the deceased and develop a fear of separation from their parents following a death (Ross & Baron-Sorenson). It is commonly after the age of five years that most children begin to understand that death is irreversible, although other misunderstandings may still exist (Harvey).

Further research has aimed to identify the grief reactions of children under the age of five in response to the death of a loved one (Ormond & Charbonneau, 1995). Ormond and Charbonneau found that the grief reactions of children under the age of six appeared different to those common in adults, possibly due to variances in their level of understanding. Observations conducted of children during a grief support program indicated that the main reaction of the young children to a human death was sadness in relation to separation from the loved one. Counsellors reported that children asked many questions about where the deceased had gone and when they would return (Ormond & Charbonneau). Parents of the children in the program discussed concerns that even though they had explained death and much time had passed,

children were still enquiring as to when the deceased would return (Ormond & Charbonneau). The older children, above the age of five, demonstrated different behaviours during the therapy sessions compared to those below the age of five. These behaviours included anger, sadness, confusion and loneliness. According to Ormond and Charbonneau, it is likely that the older children behaved differently to younger children due to their ability to better understand the meaning of death. The behaviours of the older children were more representative of common grief reactions in adults, whereas the reactions of children under five generally demonstrated misunderstanding of the permanence of death.

It is more common in children above the age of six to express strong emotional reactions following the death of a loved one (Oltjenbruns, 2001). According to Sife (2005) such reactions may occur in children who experience a loss between the age of six and nine years, as children of this age are more likely to comprehend the irreversibility and universality of death compared to younger children. It is also likely that children between six and nine years will become interested in the rituals surrounding death, such as burial, and may question what occurs following death, such as going to heaven (Mercurio & McNamee, 2006). Children of this age may react to the death of a loved one with excessive fear and anxiety, and may cope with these emotions by avoiding discussions about death or the deceased (Harvey, 2007). Some children around this age believe death is a horrible being, likened to a 'monster', which may target 'naughty' people (Ormond & Charbonneau, 1995). Between the ages of nine and twelve children begin to understand death from a developmental perspective similar to that of an adult (Wolfe & Senta, 1995). Most children between these ages understand that death is irreversible and happens to all living things (Ross & Baron-Sorenson, 2007). It is during this stage that children become interested in the biological aspects of death, as well as the emotional aspects (Mercurio &

McNamee). Reactions that may be expected from children of this age group following a death include problems at school, emotional distancing, isolation or separation anxiety (Ross & Baron-Sorenson). As children develop, it is likely their understanding of death will evolve resulting in different reactions to those which may occur in children of younger age groups.

The enhanced understanding of older children was evident in a study exploring the experiences of children referred to a grief support program by their parents (Wolfe & Senta, 1995). The study collected interviews from children between the ages of nine and twelve years in relation to their experiences following a human death. In addition, parents were also interviewed about their concerns and reasons for referring children to the program. The majority of parents reported that they had referred children to the program in response to out of character behaviour they perceived to be a consequence of their loss. A combination of parent and child interviews indicated that grief experiences of children between the ages of nine and twelve included anger, depression, guilt, nightmares, aggression, problems at school, substance abuse and an inability to relate to peers (Wolfe & Senta). It was also found that the majority of children in the study used coping strategies such as avoiding or hiding their feelings in order to cope with their grief (Wolfe & Senta). The children reported perceived lack of understanding from others in relation to their specific situation. They also discussed the support group as a beneficial experience as it allowed them to openly express their memories and experience of the loss, which many had not felt comfortable doing prior to the program. Therefore, although children between the age of nine and twelve have the developmental capability to understand death, their reactions and coping strategies may vary to those of adults.

Not only do the grief experiences of children vary depending on their age at the time of the loss, but their perceptions of a previous death may also evolve as they mature (Thomas, 2005).

According to Oltjenbruns (2001) children may re-experience their reactions to a prior loss as a result of an enhanced understanding of death. For example, a three year old child who experiences the death of a pet may not appear upset by the loss as he/she may be unable to comprehend that his/her pet will not return. However, two years later when that child's understanding of death has expanded, he/she may realise he/she is never going to see his/her pet again and experience strong emotions in accordance with such realisation. The re-grieving phenomenon explains why some children may display grieving behaviours many years after the death of a loved one (Wolfe & Senta, 1995). Therefore, the grief process for children may last longer than that of an adult due to such delays and reoccurrences of grief in response to development. Further research has also indicated that a child's response to a death may be more intense than an adult's. A study conducted by Jarolmen (1988) compared the grief reactions of adults and children who had experienced the death of a pet in the previous year. The participants consisted of 106 children and 270 adults who completed the Pet Attachment Survey and the Grief Experience Inventory. The results demonstrated that although there were no significant differences in the attachment scores of adults and children, children had significantly higher grief scores. Therefore, indicating that children may experience more intense grief following the death of a pet compared to an adult.

According to Nguyen and Rosengren (2004) the manner in which a death is explained to a child may influence how that child copes with their loss. Inappropriate or inaccurate explanations of death may confuse children and make it more difficult for them to understand the concept of death (Corr, 2003-2004). Commonly used euphemisms such as 'passed away', 'put to sleep' or 'lost' may give children incorrect perceptions of what death involves (Black, 1996). As a result children may develop unrealistic expectations of deceased loved ones being able to return from

death. In a study conducted by Nguyen and Rosengren, parents reported that children believed that dead people or pets may 'wake up' from death and return home. According to Mercurio and McNamee (2006) it is important to tell children about a death as soon as possible after it occurs in a comfortable environment using accurate details. Children may need assistance in understanding that deceased animals are no longer like living animals, as their bodies no longer function (Black). Children may ask many questions as they attempt to understand death, during this time it is important that adults answer questions factually to avoid confusion (Baker, Sedney, & Gross, 1992). Children who do not understand death are unlikely to be able to accept it, and consequently may have difficulty coping with grief and moving on with their life.

As children vary in their emotional reactions to death, the coping strategies used by children of different age groups are also likely to vary. According to Ormond and Charbonneau (1995), children under the age of six years usually do not have the language capability to properly express their feelings or needs. Therefore, it may be more effective to use creative activities such as drawing or painting when helping children of this age express their emotions. Older children may prefer to have group discussions or use role plays to express their grief (Wolfe & Senta, 1995). According to Corr (2003-2004) involving children in pet burials and providing the opportunity for them to say goodbye is also an important part of the grieving process. It is important that a child's emotions following the death of a pet are validated as significant as children who fear the reactions of others may choose to withhold their emotions and may consequently have difficulty coping with the loss (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2006). A study conducted by Lueckan (2000) suggests that difficulties during childhood grief may have long term implications for the wellbeing of a child. The results indicated that individuals who had suffered complicated losses during childhood were significantly more likely to demonstrate

hostility and depression in adulthood. Therefore, the use of certain coping strategies and provision of adult support may be important factors that assist children to work through the grieving process without difficulties, to ensure they reach a stage where they are able to move on with their life.

### Conclusion

Many individuals develop strong attachments to the companion animal with which they share their lives. A strong human-animal bond often leads to intense and long-lasting grief reactions following the death of a pet. Such grief reactions in adults may include emotions such as sadness and guilt, as well as changes in behaviour such as isolation and sleep disturbances. However, research suggests that the grieving process for children may vary to that of adults. The developmental capabilities of children to understand the meaning of death are likely to influence the way children will experience a loss. Although, there is much research which addresses the experiences of adults following the loss of a pet, the majority of research surrounding the grief experiences of children focuses on human death. As companion animals often play an important role in the lives of children, further research is needed to explore the experiences of children following the death of a pet. As some children, particularly those under five, may not have the ability to express their experiences it may be useful to seek the perspectives of parents in relation to their children's experiences surrounding the death of a pet. Future research should aim to explore the grief reactions of children following the death of a pet, in order to better understand the process of pet grieving for children.

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Running head: PET LOSS

## Experiencing Pet Loss as a Child: A Parental Perspective

Sarah Jayne Parkin

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## Experiencing Pet Loss as a Child: A Parental Perspective

### Abstract

Research suggests pets may play a significant role in the lives of children. Children who build strong relationships with their pets are likely to experience a strong grief reaction following their death. The current research study aimed to explore the experiences of children under the age of twelve who have previously experienced the loss of a pet, from parents' perspectives. Data were collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews conducted with ten participants. The results of thematic data analysis identified three major themes: children's' experience of pet death, coping with loss, and parents' experience of pet death, with accompanying sub-themes. It was found that the results of the current study concur with previous literature. The findings of the current study indicate the complexity of the pet grieving process for children and emphasise the need for continuing research in this area.

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August 25<sup>th</sup> 2008

### Experiencing Pet Loss as a Child: A Parental Perspective

Companion animals often play a significant role in many families, such as protector or helper (Barker, Rogers, Turner, Karpf, & Suthers-McCabe, 2003). However, most often companion animals are perceived to play the role of a friend, providing unconditional affection to those surrounding them (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988). Research has demonstrated that an individual's bond with his/her pet is often as strong as, and sometimes stronger than relationships with other humans (Sharkin & Knox, 2003). As a result, the grief experienced by those who lose a pet may be intense and long-lasting (Gage & Holcomb, 1991). Individuals often repress their grief following the loss of a pet due to fear that others will fail to acknowledge such a loss as significant (Donohue, 2005). Although research exists that explores the experiences of adults following the death of a pet, further attention should be paid to the experiences of children. A child's experience of pet loss may vary to that of an adult depending on the developmental maturity of the child (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2006). As a consequence, this study was designed to explore the experiences of children surrounding the loss of a pet, in order to better understand the process of pet grieving for a child.

### The Human-Animal Bond

Pet ownership in Australia is common, particularly within families who have children. In 2006 the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that 85% of primary school children had a family pet. Not only is pet ownership common, but strong human-animal bonds often develop between individuals and their pets (Sable, 1995). A survey completed by 13,000 individuals found that the majority of participants considered their pets significant members of their families (Sussman, 1985). For children, pets often become close companions comparable to best friends or siblings (Corr, 2003-2004; Melson, 2003). During a series of interviews, adolescents who had

previously experienced pet loss discussed the significance of the relationship they had built with their pet (Brown, Richards, & Wilson, 1996). It was identified that growing together, playing together, and sharing with each other often led to the development of a strong relationship between a child and their pet (Brown et al.). According to John Bowlby's Attachment Theory, children may develop strong attachments to pets because they serve to satisfy common needs for affection, comfort, safety or security (Holmes, 1993). However, the likelihood of an individual developing a strong attachment to a pet may depend on certain qualities of that animal. Toray (2004) suggests that humans may be more likely to develop attachments to animals that display infantile qualities (neoteny), human-like personalities (anthropomorphism) or mimic human-like behaviour (alleomemetic). Interviews with 612 pet owners indicated that dogs were not only recognised as displaying more anthropomorphic and alleomemetic qualities compared to other types of pets, but also scored highest on attachment scales (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988). Therefore, although many individuals build close relationships with their pets, attachment may vary depending on the characteristics of the pet and the circumstances surrounding the relationship.

#### Grief Reactions of Adults Following the Death of a Pet

An individual with a strong attachment to a companion animal is likely to experience strong feelings of grief following their death (Sharkin & Bahrack, 1990). Research conducted around personal experiences following the death of a pet has mainly focused on those experiences of adults (McCutheon & Fleming, 2001-2002). According to Archer and Winchester (1994), common emotions experienced by an adult following the death of a pet include anger, guilt, anxiety, sadness, hopelessness, disbelief, irritability, longing for the deceased and depression. It has also been found that adults may experience sleep disturbances, eating disturbances and reduction in socialisation (Clements, Benasuti, & Carmone, 2003). Further

research has indicated that the extent of attachment to a pet is the strongest predictor of an intense grief reaction following their death (Jarolmen, 1998). Other factors have also been found to influence the duration and intensity of grief for an adult following the death of a pet. It was found by McCutcheon and Fleming that the unexpected death of a pet tends to result in a significantly stronger grief reaction compared to the reaction following the death of a pet from natural causes (old age) or euthanasia. The experience of traumatic deaths, such as a pet being hit by a car, may also be more difficult to cope with compared to a death of natural causes or euthanasia (Cohen, Mannarino, Greenberg, Padlo, & Shipley, 2002). Research suggests that individuals who experience stressful events prior to the loss of a pet may suffer an enhanced grief reaction (Margolies, 1999). Social support has also been identified as important following the death of a pet, as individuals who do not have support available are likely to experience more intense or longer lasting grief symptoms (Toray, 2004; Weisman, 1990-1991). Therefore, an adult with a strong attachment to their pet may experience a strong grief reaction following their death. However, the intensity and duration of grief may vary depending on other circumstances surrounding the loss.

Research surrounding pet loss experiences of adults has also identified a common duration of grief following the death of a pet. A study conducted by Wrobel and Dye (2003) monitored 174 adults who had recently lost a dog or cat over an 18 month period. It was found that symptoms were most intense during the first two weeks following the loss and gradually decreased in frequency after this period. The average length of grief experienced due to the death of a pet was calculated to be 10 months, similar to the average 13 month period of grief following a human death (Shuchter & Zisook, 1994). However, it was found that although the majority of symptoms eventually ceased, 'timeless' emotions continued to reappear following

the average grief period, particularly surrounding birthdays or anniversaries (Wrobel & Dye). Therefore, adults who lose a pet with whom they have a strong attachment may experience grief symptoms similar in intensity and duration to those experienced following the death of a human.

### The Experience of Grief for Children

Research surrounding the grief experiences of children has primarily focused on human loss (Black, 1996). However, information from such research is relevant as it has provided valuable information about how the grief process for children is different to that of adults (Deveau, 1995). Research suggests that children of different ages may differ in their reaction to the loss due to variances in their developmental level of understanding. A theory developed by Baker, Sedney, and Gross (1992) describes the grief process for children as a series of tasks. These tasks are grouped into three levels: early tasks, middle tasks and late tasks. Although this theory is developed based on observations of children following a human death, the concept may still be relevant to pet loss because children often develop relationships with pets which are as significant as those with humans. The theory states that children must work through each level of tasks consecutively in order to reach a stage where they are able continue with normal life. The early tasks of grief consist of understanding that someone has died and ensuring self protection. These tasks may be achieved by asking numerous questions, observing others reactions, replicating such reactions and using denial, distortion or isolation to protect themselves from grief. The middle tasks involve acknowledging the reality of the loss, re-evaluating the relationship with the deceased and dealing with the emotional distress that result from acceptance of the death. It is during the late tasks that children must develop a new personal identity and learn to invest in new relationships without excessive fear of loss or comparison to the deceased. Following the completion of all previous tasks children are then able to resume the

developmental course that was interrupted by grief and learn how to cope with continual feelings of grief that may arise in the future, such as on birthdays or anniversaries.

Developmental research has explored the ability of children of various ages to understand biological concepts, such as death (Deveau, 1995). It has been found that a child's ability to understand death increases as they mature developmentally (Thomas, 2005). Children under the age of three will generally show little emotion following a death as they are not capable of understanding what it means (Mecurio & McNamee, 2006). Children who experience the death of a loved one between the ages of three and five years are likely to miss the deceased and be upset by the separation, but may not understand that death is permanent (Harvey, 2007). Children of this age are likely to compare death to sleep and may believe that although the deceased is not with them at this time they are able to return from death as they wish (Ross & Baron-Sorenson, 2007). Children under the age of five may experience various reactions to a death, such as regression in development, helplessness, guilt and repetition of questions about where the deceased has gone (Harvey). Children may also have dreams about the deceased and develop a fear of separation from their parents following a death (Ross & Baron-Sorenson). According to Sife (2005), children aged five or younger are also likely to willingly accept a replacement pet following the death of a pet. Therefore, due to a diminished ability to understand death, children under the age of five may be unlikely to experience a strong grief reaction following the death of a pet.

According to Sife (2005), when children reach the age of six they begin to understand that death is universal and irreversible. Between the ages of six and nine children often become interested in rituals surrounding death, such as burial, and may question what occurs following death, such as 'going to heaven' (Mercurio & McNamee, 2006). Children of this age may react

to the death of a loved one with excessive fear and anxiety, and may cope with these emotions by avoiding discussions about death or the deceased (Harvey, 2007). It is between the ages of nine and twelve that children begin to understand death from a developmental perspective similar to that of an adult (Wolfe & Senta, 1995). It is during this stage that children become interested in the biological aspects of death, as well as the emotional aspects (Mercurio & McNamee). Reactions that may be expected from children of this age group following a death include problems at school, emotional distancing, isolation or separation anxiety (Ross & Baron-Sorenson, 2007). As children develop, it is likely their understanding of death will evolve resulting in different reactions to those which may occur in children of younger age groups.

Not only do the grief experiences of children vary depending on their age at the time of the loss, but their perceptions of a previous death may also evolve as they mature (Thomas, 2005). According to Oltjenbruns (2001) children may re-experience their reactions to a prior loss as a result of an enhanced understanding of death. For example, a three year old child who experiences the death of a pet may not appear upset by the loss as he/she may be unable to comprehend that his/her pet will not return. However, two years later when that child's understanding of death has expanded, he/she may realise he/she is never going to see his/her pet again and experience strong emotions in accordance with such realisation. The re-grieving phenomenon explains why some children may display grieving behaviours many years after the death of a loved one (Wolfe & Senta, 1995). However, the extent of the grief reaction experienced by a child may not only depend on their age but also on other various factors surrounding the loss.

The research indicates that a child is likely to experience a strong emotional reaction to a loss if they had a strong relationship with the deceased (Ormond & Charbonneau, 1995).

Although this research explored the experiences of children following a human loss, research with adults also demonstrated that attachment was the strongest predictor of an intense grief reaction following the death of a pet (Harvey, 2007). According to Nguyen and Rosengren (2004) it is also particularly important with children to explain the death of a pet in a factual manner. Children are often confused by death and unless they receive factual explanations the children may remain confused and are unlikely to cope well with the loss (Mercurio & McNamee, 2006). Therefore, the grief reaction experienced by a child following the death of a pet is likely to vary to that of an adult. The extent of the grief reaction experienced may depend on the child's age, attachment to the pet and the way in which the death was explained to the child. It is also possible that other factors that influenced the grief of adults following the death of a pet may also influence children in the same situation, such as the way in which the pet died, recent stressful events and the availability of social support following the loss.

#### Area of Study

Previous research has explored the importance of companion animals and the possible benefits they contribute to the lives of humans (Barker, Rogers, Turner, Karpf, & Suther-McCabe, 2003). In particular, companion animals have been identified as playing a common role in the upbringing of children in western society (Melson, 2003). As a result, additional literature has sought to explore the experiences of individuals following the death of a pet (Archer & Winchester, 1994). However, the majority of such research has focused on the experiences of adults, and not children. Recent theories suggest that the grief process of children may vary to that of an adult, due to differences in developmental maturity (Baker, Sedney, & Gross, 1992). Such theories have been confirmed by studies exploring the experiences of children from various age groups following the death of a loved one (Ormond & Charbonneau, 1995; Wolfe & Senta,

1995). However, these studies have focused on human loss, and not that of companion animals. Considering companion animals often play significant roles in the lives of children, the experiences of children following the loss of a pet should be further explored. Based on possible difficulties with limited language and expression in young children, it may be useful to seek the perspectives of parents in relation to how their children experienced the death of a pet.

### *Research Question*

The study's aim is to explore the experiences of children under the age of twelve who have previously experienced the loss of a pet. Therefore, the research question is as follows: What are children's experiences surrounding the loss of a pet, from a parental perspective?

### *Methodology*

#### *Research Design*

An in-depth qualitative research design was used to explore the experiences of children following the loss of a pet, as reported from their parents' perspectives. Data were collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews lasting between 15-45 minutes. Semi-structured interviews are designed to be informal in order to allow for flexibility in questions and the development of rapport with the participants (Cresswell, 2003; 2007). It was considered that such a method was most appropriate in order to focus on individual experiences of children, from the perspective of their parents. Due to the lack of literature related to the grief experiences of children following the death of a pet and the individuality of the grief process, it was believed beneficial to use interviews in order to gather a large amount of rich data that may provide detailed information in regard to parents' perspectives on children's experiences.

### *Paradigm and Assumptions*

The current research is based on a phenomenological framework (Manen, 2006). Phenomenology aims to identify the meaning of the 'lived' experience of a particular phenomenon (Giorgi, 1985; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Phenomenology focuses on the importance of the meaning an individual attributes to the experience of a phenomenon (Caelli, 2001; Moustakas, 1994). As a result participants are encouraged to describe an experience while the researcher only probes in order to gain clarity (Smith & Osborn, 2003). It is considered that this framework is most appropriate for the current study as no other framework adequately considers the importance of the meanings one attributes to an experience (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). In terms of the current research it is considered important to explore what meaning parents attribute to the experience of pet loss for their children.

### *Participants*

The current study consisted of ten parents whose children had experienced the death of a pet under the age of 12 years. An age restriction of 12 years or under was applied as children over 12 are considered adolescents and may have different experiences. Demographic information was collected from each participant prior to the interview (see Table 1). In total, the experiences of eighteen children between the ages of 2 years and 12 years were explored via their parents' perspectives. The deceased companion animals consisted of two rabbits, two mice and six dogs. The causes of death were most commonly natural causes (four pets), followed by euthanasia (three pets), and then accidental death (three pets). The length of pet ownership before death ranged from four months to 16 years. The most recent death occurred two years ago, whereas some occurred as long as 13 years ago. Of the ten participants in the study, eight had also experienced other losses prior to the loss of the pet discussed in the interview.

Table 1

*Participants' demographic information*

Parents' pseudonym	Child's age at time of pet death	Type of Pet (length of ownership)	Cause of pet's death (time since death)	Prior losses
Anne	12	Dog (9yrs)	Natural causes (6yrs)	Yes
Ben	10	Rabbit (4yrs)	Natural causes (10yrs)	No
Candice	5	Rabbit (1yr)	Euthanasia (2yrs)	No
	3			
Diana	3	Mouse (18mths)	Natural causes (2yrs)	Yes
Eleanor	10	Dog (15yrs)	Euthanasia (8yrs)	Yes
	4			
	3			
Fiona	4	Mouse (4mths)	Accidental death (4yrs)	Yes
	2			
Gemma	12	Dog (8yrs)	Accidental death (11yrs)	Yes
	10			
Hannah	5	Dog (16yrs)	Euthanasia (6yrs)	No
Ingrid	12	Dog (7yrs)	Accidental death (8yrs)	Yes
	11			
Jane	11	Dog (10yrs)	Natural causes (13yrs)	Yes
	9			
	3			

*Procedure*

Upon receipt of approval to conduct the research from the Faculty of Computing, Health and Science Ethics Committee participant recruitment began. Potential participants listed on the School of Psychology and Social Science Participant Register were contacted by the researcher via email including an information letter (Appendix A). Eight individuals expressed interest via return email and were contacted via telephone to arrange an interview date and time. In addition, two further participants were recruited using a technique referred to as snowball sampling, which involves initial participants suggesting additional individuals who may be interested in participating in the study (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005).

All interviews were conducted in private case study rooms in the library at Edith Cowan University. Before the interview began the researcher outlined the research, collected written consent (Appendix B) and completed the demographic information sheet (Appendix C) with the participant. The participants were provided with the opportunity to ask questions and reminded that they may withdraw at any time. The semi-structured interview was then conducted using the interview schedule (Appendix D) lasting between 15-45 minutes and recorded on a digital audio recorder. The audio recordings of the interviews did not include participant names. The interview schedule was designed to encourage participants to describe their experiences, with additional prompts to explore specific topics. During the interview the researcher used a notepad and pen to record details such as body language or emotions that occurred throughout the interview, to be used later in order to extract more meaning from transcribed records. At the end of the interview the participant was thanked for his/her time and participation and provided with a list of support services in case of distress (Appendix E).

Data collection ceased following the tenth interview, as data saturation had occurred.

Meaning that the data became repetitive and no new concepts were presented (Cresswell, 2003). Interviews were transcribed verbatim immediately following the interview, with any identifying information or names (pet's and children's names) replaced with a pseudonym. All information was treated as strictly confidential, with access only available to the researcher and research supervisors. All consent forms and transcribed records were stored in a locked filing cabinet in the supervisor's office in the School of Psychology Edith Cowan University.

### *Data Analysis*

The data collected from the interviews was analysed using thematic analysis, which focuses on identifiable themes in the data (Aronson, 1994). Thematic analysis is a method of analysis used to identify patterns or themes within data (Morse, 2008). For the purposes of this study thematic analysis was conducted as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). To complement the thematic analysis, three additional techniques were also utilised: data reduction, data display and data verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The first phase of thematic analysis involved the researcher familiarising herself with the transcribed data by reading through the data as a whole in order to gain an overall impression of what was said (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this process any researcher thoughts were recorded in the margins of the transcripts, such as similarity of topics. Each interview was then segmented into initial categories based on similarities of theme (Aronson, 1994). The segmentation of interviews was conducted using data reduction, which involved sorting the data into similar categories in order to discard irrelevant information and focus on reoccurring topics (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The reduced data was then displayed in a conceptually ordered matrix (see Appendix F) in which participant responses were displayed in categories relating to

similar themes as identified during data reduction (Miles & Huberman). These categories were then developed into themes and provided with a label, such as social support (Braun & Clarke).

The process of data verification was then conducted (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data verification involved re-examining the themes in order to ensure their appropriateness (Miles & Huberman). During this process, some adjustments were made to the organisation of themes and a series of sub-themes were also identified. For example, it was found that one sub-theme related more to a different theme than the one with which it was originally associated. The final phase of thematic analysis involved comparing the verified major themes and sub-themes to information from previous literature (Cresswell, 2003). The comparison of the current study's findings to earlier theory and research assisted the researcher to derive meanings from the results.

To ensure credibility of the research, triangulation was utilised, as information was drawn from various theoretical perspectives (Cresswell, 2003; 2007). These included attachment perspectives (Holmes, 1993; Toray 2004), grief perspectives (Kubler-Ross, 1969), and developmental perspectives (Mecurio & McNamee, 2006). Following identification of themes four participants were contacted via telephone to discuss the appropriateness of the findings, a method known as 'member checking' (Cresswell, 2003). It was found that participants agreed with the conclusions that were drawn from the data they provided, therefore increasing the credibility of the researcher's interpretations. In order to increase the transferability of the research findings 'thick description', such as direct quotes from participants, were included in the findings section of this article (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer review and debriefing were also utilised to minimise researcher bias and ensure the appropriateness of the conclusions drawn from the data (Cresswell, 2007). An audit trail consisting of a step by step record of all

methodological and analytical decisions, including the raw data and results, was also used to enhance dependability and confirmability of the research findings (Lincoln & Guba).

Findings and Interpretations

The present study aimed to explore the experiences of children surrounding the loss of a pet, as viewed from the parents’ perspectives. Through the analytic procedures a range of themes and subthemes were identified, and are presented in Table 2. For the purpose of clarity this section has been divided to discuss each theme and its accompanying subthemes individually, and how each relates to previous literature.

Table 2

*Themes and sub-themes of the experiences surrounding the death of a pet*

Main Themes	Sub-themes
Children’s Experience of Pet Death	Grief Reaction
	Attachment
Coping With Loss	Strategies
	Social Support
	Explanation to Children
	Way in Which the Pet Died
Parents’ Experience of Pet Death	Parents’ Emotional Influence
	Parental Awareness

### *Children's Experience of Pet Death*

Children's experience of the death of a pet was found to be a main theme in the data. It was found that each child's experience of pet loss was different depending on a range of circumstances. Two sub-themes were identified as significant within children's experiences, these are discussed below.

#### *Grief Reaction*

Parents reported observing a range of emotions and behaviours in their children following the death of a pet. As the majority of literature related to children's grief reactions is divided into two age groups (Ormond & Charbonneau, 1995; Wolfe & Senta, 1995) the results will be discussed in terms of the reactions of children under five and those above five. There were seven children under the age of five, of whom only three were reported to appear upset following the death of their pet. It was identified that children under the age of five who were reported by parents to appear upset following the death of a pet were also perceived to have 'got over it' quickly and moved on, in accordance with research conducted by Ormond and Charbonneau (1995). Parents of the other children under the age of five perceived that their children were not affected by the death due to young age and a lack of understanding. Experiences of children above five reported by parents included sadness, sense of loss, shock, guilt, fear, nightmares, sleep problems, anger and longing for the pet. Such symptoms are comparable to those experienced by adults following the death of a pet (Wrobel & Dye, 2003), and concur with findings in relation to the experiences of older children following a human loss (Wolfe & Senta, 1995). For example: Peter (aged 10yrs) "*used to get upset at night and cry himself to sleep...nightmares continued for months.*"

Information in relation to duration of grief also emerged from the data. Parents reported that the majority of children experienced intense emotionality initially after the death, such as crying, which decreased as time increased. This was also found in a study conducted by Wrobel and Dye (2003) exploring the duration of grief for adults following the death of a pet. Children who had a strong grief reaction were identified as grieving for a longer period of time: *"she (Sarah, aged 12) was very distraught over the loss of the dog, probably took 12 months to move on"*. However, the duration of grief also appeared to be linked to the child's age at the time of the loss. Children under the age of five were reported by parents to only have grieved for between one day and one week following the death of a pet, for example John (3yrs) *"was sad and low then once it happened he moved on"*. Parents reported that their older children, five years and above, continued to grieve for between three weeks to twelve months following the death of a pet. Some parents reported their children continuing to experience grief emotions to this day. However, these reports were only made in relation to children above the age of five who had experienced the loss of a dog: Peter (aged 10yrs) was *"...for the first two weeks crying a lot and talked about missing him a lot. But I mean the nightmares continued for months, he couldn't sleep properly for ages. He is still so upset about Jake [pet dog]."* Similarly, Ingrid's children (aged 11 & 12 years) still miss their pet dog who died eight years ago: *"I think the intense grief lasted for about six to eight months... They still talk about him now. So I think it's timeless. I think you always still miss them, think about them."* For Walter (aged 9), his mother perceives that: *"I don't think deep down he has ever really come to terms with losing Dougs [pet dog]. Deep down inside. And you know I think he is still grieving over it."* The concept of long lasting timeless grief emotions found in the current study are similar to those found in a study

exploring the duration of grief following human loss (Shuchter & Zisook, 1994), demonstrating that the death of a pet dog may be as significant to a child as the loss of a human is to an adult.

Therefore, the data collected from parents indicates that the grief reactions of children of various ages may include a range of emotions and behaviours, which may vary in intensity and duration. Such findings are consistent with prior research related to adults' experiences following a pet loss and children's' experiences following a human loss (Archer & Winchester, 1994; Oltjenbruns, 2001). Overall, it appears that the duration of grief symptoms was longer lasting for children who experienced a stronger grief reaction initially. In particular, the loss of a dog was demonstrated to elicit stronger and longer-lasting grief reactions compared to the loss of mice or rabbits.

### *Attachment*

There were six parents who rated their pets as significant members of the family, all of which were pet dogs. This finding is consistent with previous research that also found individuals are more likely to build strong attachments to pet dogs due to their anthropomorphic (human-like personalities) and allecomemetic (mimic human-like behaviour) characteristics (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988; Toray, 2004). The level of attachment to a pet varied within the family, some siblings were described as being closer to a pet than others: "*Melanie [aged 11] wasn't too close with Dougal, but Walter [aged 9] was*". Parents attributed differences in attachment due to variations in time spent with the pet, personalities of children, age of children or age differences between siblings. Parents also perceived that children who had a closer relationship with a pet experienced a stronger grief reaction following the pet's death. As demonstrated by a statement from Eleanor: "*Peter [aged 10] was attached to Jake [pet dog] like the others weren't...before Peter had a brother and sister, he had Jake... they did everything*".

*together. So he took it the hardest. The others weren't really affected.*" For Jane, each of her three children reacted differently to the loss because of their relationship with their dog:

*"Melanie [aged 11] wasn't too close with Dougal [pet dog], but Walter [aged 9] was. Melanie was a little bit upset [after the death] but bounced back pretty quick smart. But Walter on the other hand didn't. He was devastated."* Such findings are consistent with previous research which indicates that a strong attachment is a strong predictor of an intense grief reaction (Brown, Richards, & Wilson, 1996). The statements from parents also indicate that a child's attachment to a pet varied depending on the personality of the child, consistent with research conducted by Corr (2003-2004) who found that children often build close relationships with pets, similar to that of best friends or siblings, but the extent of the relationship may depend on characteristics of both the pet and the child.

Therefore, the results indicate that all pet dogs in the study were perceived by parents to be significant members of the family. Parents who owned a dog also reported the development of strong relationships between their pet and at least one of their children, although attachment varied depending on other factors. It was found that parents perceived that children who had developed a close relationship to their pet dog also experienced an intense grief reaction following the pet's death.

### *Coping With Loss*

The way in which parents and children coped with the loss of a pet was also identified as a major theme. It was found that there were a range of factors that influenced how well a child dealt with a loss. A range of common strategies used by families to assist children with coping following the death of a pet were also identified. The theme was identified as consisting of four sub-themes, as discussed below.

### *Strategies*

The majority of families used similar methods to assist children to cope with the death of a pet. These strategies included emotional and physical comfort, such as crying, talking, cuddling and kisses. As well as, expression of children's thoughts and feelings through drawing. All of these strategies were perceived by parents to be beneficial to the child. These findings concur with previous research also indicating that such strategies assist children to cope with a loss (Ormond & Charbonneau, 1995; Wolfe & Senta, 1995). Parents who involved their children in burial rituals perceived that it helped their child better understand death and be able to accept it, as was also found by Corr (2003-2004): *"My husband took Jake [the dog] to my parents house and he and Peter [aged 10] buried him. It was good, a bit of closure."*

Out of ten families, six replaced the deceased pet within twelve months following the loss. Parents of children aged five and under reported that their children appeared pleased with a new pet. Parents of younger children also perceived that a replacement pet assisted their children to cope with the loss and move on, for Joan (aged 5): *"We got another dog and that pretty much cured it [Joan's grief]. I reckon that if you lose a dog and you have nothing to replace it with, I think it takes way longer to get over it."* In contrast, for Walter (aged 9): *"... about twelve months later we got another dog, and that made him really angry because he saw that as a replacement."* The effectiveness of a replacement pet as a strategy to aid coping was also found to vary depending on the child's age in a study conducted by Sife (2005), who states that younger children, aged five or younger, will be more willing to accept a replacement pet than older children.

Overall, it appears there are a range of coping strategies that may be used by parents following the death of a pet. Parents reported that they saw positive outcomes when children

were encouraged to express their emotion through crying, talking and drawing. Including children in burial rituals was also considered beneficial to the children in the grieving process. However, the reactions of children to a replacement pet indicate that young children may be more likely to accept the idea compared to older children.

### *Social Support*

All parents identified some form of support available to their children following the death of their pet. Parents perceived that the most common and important form of support available was that provided by themselves, Hannah says she supported her daughter Joan (aged 5): *"I think we sort of just did it as a family. A strong family unit. My husband and I."* Parents whose children had lost small animals, such as rabbits or mice, reported that the loss was not acknowledged as significant by others, Candice perceived that: *"I don't think that people think a rabbit dying is a big deal."* This concurs with findings by Donohue (2005) who found that many people feel the loss of a pet is not acknowledged as significant. Some parents identified that social support was not very important for their children because their children did not experience a strong emotional reaction to the loss : *"...he [John, aged 3] wasn't really that upset anyway, if it had of been a big deal then he may of needed much more support, but it wasn't."* Many parents perceived that social understanding was received from other individuals who had previously experienced pet loss, as identified by Anne: *"They all have pets, they know what it is like to lose a pet."* Such findings may be accounted for by research suggesting many individuals build strong relationships with companion animals, so are therefore likely to sympathise with those who have recently lost a pet (Gage & Holcomb, 1991)

Professional groups, such as veterinarians and teachers were also identified by parents as groups of people who were helpful in providing support to their children: *"The vet was lovely, he*

*talked to her [Alley, aged 5] and told her why we had to leave him [pet rabbit]. I think my daughter's teacher was quite understanding too, coz she told her teacher about it.*" In Eleanor's perspective: *"Even taking time off school, you know the teachers were sympathetic and understanding."* Joan (aged 5) was very upset when her dog was euthanized but received support from the vet: *"... he sent flowers, just to Joan, and said you know sorry you were so upset."* Such support has not been identified in prior literature exploring the experience of pet loss for adults. However, this finding indicates that teachers and veterinarians may be an additional source of support available to children following the death of a pet.

It was perceived by some parents that a lack of support following the death of a pet made it more difficult for their children to cope, and also contributed to longer lasting grief symptoms. As demonstrated by Jane, whose family was overseas at the time of the loss: *"...that was one of the reasons that it took him [Walter, aged 9] so long to get over it [the death of his dog], because he didn't have that support around him."* As was also found by Toray (2004), who identified that individuals who do not receive social support following a death are likely to experience more intense and longer lasting grief symptoms.

Therefore, based on parents' reports it appears that the availability of social support following the death of a pet may influence the intensity and duration of a child's grief. However, some parents believe that the support of immediate family is enough, and others believe support is only important if the loss was significant to the child. Although some participants discussed that others did not consider their loss a 'big deal', it was apparent that many children have support available to them through teachers, vets, immediate family and often extended family.

### *Parents' Explanations to Children*

During interviews parents often mentioned pet heaven as an appropriate way to explain the death of a pet to a child. The majority of children in the study had experienced a death prior to the death of the pet discussed in the interview, only four had not. Parents of older children stated that their children did not require an explanation as they were old enough to understand.

However, the majority of parents stated that being honest, emphasising the pet was not in pain and telling the child that the pet had gone to a better place helped their children cope better with the loss. Hannah explained to Joan (aged 5) about 'doggy heaven': "*She was quite happy with that, thinking that she had gone somewhere nice to be with her mum and dad.*" Similarly, Jane also perceived her explanation helped Walter (aged 9) cope: "*I told them that he had gone to sleep under a tree... it was peaceful... he wasn't in pain. I explained to him that he [pet dog] is up there with his [Walter's] dad...he was quite happy to know that...*" As research around pet loss focuses on adults experiences, this was not identified in previous literature. According to Nguyen and Rosengren (2004) it is important to explain a death to children using factual information to ensure they cope well with the loss. However, although many parents said that the truth was important, their descriptions of their explanations seem to focus on making death seem a pleasant occurrence and emphasising the belief that the deceased is in a better place. The parents' reported that they believed a pleasant explanation of death allowed their child to cope better with the death of a pet.

### *Way in Which the Pet Died*

The pets in the current study died as a result of one of the following types of death: euthanasia, natural causes, or accidental death. Of the ten pets, four died due to natural causes, three died as a result of euthanasia and three died as a result of an accidental incident. The

incidents of accidental death include a dog being hit by a car, a mouse getting stuck in its cage, and a dog dying as a result of injuries sustained during illegal dog fighting. Some parents reported that the way in which the pet died made a difference to how their children coped. It was found that sudden or unexpected death may occur due to natural causes or accidental death, and may elicit additional emotions in children such as shock: “...*she had gone outside to see her rabbit and it was dead. She was crying a lot, she seemed a little shocked.*” Such findings concur with research conducted by Archer and Winchester (1994) who found that grief following an unexpected or sudden death of a pet may be more intense due to feelings of shock.

It has also been suggested that pet deaths resulting from euthanasia and natural causes may be easier to accept than other forms of death (Archer & Winchester, 2004). Parents perceived that having the opportunity to explain what was happening before or during death resulting from euthanasia and natural causes allowed their children to understand and cope better with the loss than if the death had of been sudden: “*She [Joan, aged 5] could see that she [pet dog] was deteriorating in health. She wasn’t shocked or anything because she knew it was happening. As the dog was getting old we were explaining what was happening.*”

For one family their pet dog was stolen to participate in illegal dog fighting, and although the culprit was caught and the dog returned, he later died due to injuries he had sustained. Ingrid perceived that the way in which the dog died made it difficult for the whole family to cope with the loss: “*I think if he had of been hit by a car or got an illness we would have been able to cope with that. But for him to go in such not a nice way...It was hard.*” Such findings concur with previous research which has also identified that accidental death is often more difficult for individuals to deal with compared to other forms of death, even more so if it is sudden, unexpected or violent (Cohen, Mannarino, Greenberg, Padlo, & Shipley, 2002). Therefore,

parents comments indicate that they perceived some forms of death, such as euthanasia, 'easier' for their children to cope with, compared to other forms of death, such as accidental death.

### *Parents' Experience of Pet Death*

As data was collected from the parents of children, and not the children themselves, the parents' experience of pet death was also considered a major theme in the data. It was found that parents' often referred to not only their children's emotions and experiences but also their own, and in turn how their experience influenced their child's. As a result two sub-themes were identified and are presented below.

### *Parents' Emotional Influence*

During the interviews it was common for parents to discuss not only their children's emotions in relation to the death of a pet, but also their own. Many parents who considered their pet an important part of the family became emotional during the interview process, therefore demonstrating that their pet's death was a significant event not only to their children, but also to themselves. It was reported by some parents that children under the age of five responded to parental distress following the death of a pet by mimicking their emotions. However, parents of older children believed that their children's emotions were genuinely their own. Diana perceived that her son John, aged 3, was not as upset by their pet's death as she was: *"We were sad but it is hard to know how much of it was him and not me. I was quite upset and even though I tried not to, he may have just reacted to me being upset."* Similarly, Eleanor says her youngest children (aged 5 and 4) reacted to her emotions: *"They weren't close to Jake [pet dog] but I guess they did get upset. But it was more because we were upset, and I guess that they thought they should be too."* Such findings were also present in prior research which identified that children under the age of five may not react emotionally to a death but may mimic adult emotions following a

loss (Mecurio & McNamee, 2006; Ormond & Charbonneau, 1995). Such an occurrence may be due to the limited understanding young children have of death (Mecurio & McNamee).

However, the expression of parental emotion was also perceived as a positive occurrence as it was believed to allow children to feel comfortable to express their own emotions: *"I suppose Walter [aged 9] and I supported each other over the death. Lots of crying, we cried together. It seemed to soothe him to know it was hurting me as much as it hurts him."* According to Kaufman and Kaufman (2006), the expression of parental emotion is important as it serves to validate children's emotions and assist them to cope. Therefore, these statements suggest that a parents' emotional experience of an event may influence the experience of the child. Young children were perceived by parents to be more likely to mimic what they view to be appropriate emotions following a loss. Additionally, the expression of parental emotions was perceived by parents as beneficial in validating children's emotions and assisting them in the grieving process.

#### *Parental Awareness*

From the data it also emerged that parents who experienced a strong grief reaction following the death of a pet were not always completely aware of their children's experience of the loss. Anne discussed how she may not have noticed certain aspects of her daughters' behaviour following the death of their dog: *"I didn't notice any significant changes in her behaviour...but that was because I was pretty distraught too, so I may not have realised."*

Similarly, Gemma recalls that at first she did not realise how upset her children were because she was so upset herself: *"They were very sad when he died. But the thing was that I was so very sad myself that I didn't realise exactly how much it affected them. It was so hard for me that I didn't realise how hard it was for them."* Therefore, this indicates that the experiences of parents following the death of a pet may influence the experiences of their children. As a result, the

information provided by parents in relation to their children's experiences may be biased by their own emotional recollection of the event.

### Conclusions

The current research aimed to explore the experiences of children surrounding the death of a pet, from a parent's perspective. It was found that children may experience a range of emotions and behaviours following the death of a pet, similar to those experienced following a human loss. It appears that children may be more likely to develop a strong attachment to a pet dog, compared to mice or rabbits. The findings of the current study, in comparison to previous research, indicate that the most significant predictor of a strong grief reaction following the death of a pet is a strong child-pet bond. Developmental differences in the grief experiences and effectiveness of coping strategies were apparent in children of varying ages. The grief reactions of younger children, under the age of five, may be less intense and shorter in duration compared to older children. The findings suggest that coping strategies, social support, parents' explanation of death, way in which the pet died and parents' emotional reaction may all influence the grief reaction experienced by a child following the death of a pet. In conclusion, the current research identified that a range of factors may influence the grief reaction experienced by a child following the death of a pet. The findings of this study indicate the complexity of the pet grieving process for children and emphasise the need for continuing research in this area.

### *Limitations*

For the purposes of this research it was considered appropriate to explore the experiences of children through the perspectives of their parents, as it allows for exploration of the experiences of younger children who may not have the language capabilities to express their experiences. However, such a method has its limitations. It is possible that parent's recollections

of a pet death may be biased due to time lapsed since loss and due to their own emotional experience of the event. Future research may seek the experiences of adolescents who have lost a pet in childhood, in order to remove parental bias while still allowing for adequate language capabilities. Due to the nature of recruiting participants sampling bias may also have occurred, as it may be possible that only participants with strong experiences were inclined to respond to participate in the study. It is also considered that although data saturation was reached, a larger sample size may have been beneficial in order to reduce the influence of individual differences. A larger sample size would also allow for the experiences of children from all age groups to be explored in depth in order to gather more comprehensive information in regards to the variations in reactions and coping of children who vary in developmental maturity. Despite these limitations, the data collected from parents' perspectives still provided some rich information in regard to the experiences of children following the death of a pet. Such knowledge may be expanded by further research that addresses the previous limitations.

### *Implications*

Due to high rates of pet ownership within Australian families, pet loss may be a common experience for children of all ages. As a result it is important to develop a thorough understanding of the experiences of children following such an event. The current study provides information about the experiences of children following the death of a pet, which may be extended via further research in order to compose a model of grief processes for children following the death of a pet. Although Baker, Sedney, and Gross (1992) outline a grief model for children, it is based on research surrounding human loss. Therefore, the findings of the current study may be used to compare the experiences of children following the death of a pet to those of children following the death of a human. As a result, current grief theories may be adjusted in

order to address pet loss as well as human loss. The development of a grief processes model for children following the death of a pet may be utilised in a variety of settings, such as home and school. Such information may also benefit teachers and veterinarians in understanding how to support children through the grief process. The availability of information outlining common reactions and useful coping strategies following the death of a pet may increase parental understanding of children's experiences and allow parents to better assist their children to grieve. Research exploring the grief processes of children following the death of a pet is crucial to ensure adequate support is available during such an event.

### *Future Directions*

In order to develop a better understanding of the grief process for children following the death of a pet, it is recommended that future research aim to monitor the experiences of children over a period of time as they progress through grief using a longitudinal research design. Previous literature has identified stages of grief for children following human loss and also discussed a possible re-grief phenomenon, however due to the nature of the current study such processes were not identifiable from the data collected. A longitudinal research design may be able to explore the experiences of children as they progress through stages of grief following the death of a pet and examine whether the re-grief phenomenon occurs. A focus on the experiences of children from specific age groups should also be explored in future research in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of how the developmental capabilities, reactions and common coping strategies vary as children mature. Such research in this area may also seek to explore gender differences in reactions and coping of children following the death of a pet, in order to determine whether any differences exist with children.

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## Appendix A

### Information Letter

Dear potential participant,

Thank you for your interest in my study. My name is Sarah Parkin and I am currently completing Psychology Honours at Edith Cowan University. As a part of this degree I will be conducting a research project that aims to explore the experiences of children surrounding the loss of a pet, as viewed from parents' perspectives.

For the purpose of this study I am seeking parents with children under the age of twelve who have experienced the loss of a pet in the past. Individuals interested in participating in this study will be requested to attend an interview which shall last approximately 45 minutes.

The proposed research has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Computing, Health and Science Ethics Committee. In accordance with ethical guidelines all information collected during the interview will remain confidential. The completed project will contain no identifying information.

In order to participate in the proposed research participants are required to complete the attached consent form. To ensure the accuracy of the data collected I am also seeking consent to audio-record the interview. Transcribed data will contain pseudo names and all de-identified written records and tapes will be kept in a secure location. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are able to withdraw at any time.

If you have any questions or concerns about the project please feel free to contact me via the details below. Alternatively, you may also discuss any queries you may have with the supervisors of this research, Dr Elizabeth Kaczmarek on 6304 5193 or Dr Deirdre Drake on 6304 5020. If you wish to discuss this project with an individual independent from the project please contact Dr Justine Dandy on 6304 5834.

If you are interested or would like further information, I can be contacted on the details below.

[Redacted]  
[Redacted]

[sparkin0@student.ecu.edu.au](mailto:sparkin0@student.ecu.edu.au)

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Parkin

Appendix B  
Participant Consent Form

I \_\_\_\_\_ have read the information sheet provided and agree to participate in the research study conducted by Sarah Parkin of Edith Cowan University. I understand the aims of the study and am participating voluntarily. The researcher has provided me with the opportunity to ask questions and has answered any I may have had to my satisfaction. I give my consent for the information collected during the interview to be used to complete a research project and understand that it may be published. I understand that any information that may identify me will be omitted from the final project. I realise I have the right to refuse to answer any questions and may withdraw at any time. I also grant permission for the interview to be audio recorded as I understand that the tapes and de-identified records will be kept in a secure location.

Participants Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Contact Number \_\_\_\_\_

Researchers Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

## Demographic Sheet

In order to better understand the experiences of children who lose a pet, there is some important background information that must be considered. Before I begin the interview may I ask you some background questions about your pet and family?

- How many children do you have?
  - How long has it been since the loss of your pet?
  - How old was your child/ren at the time of the loss?
  - What type of pet did you lose?
  - What was his/her name?
  - How long had you had your pet before he/she passed?
  - Did you have any other pets at the time of your loss?
  - Had your family experienced any other losses prior to the loss of your pet?
  - Had there been any significant stressful events in the past 12 months prior to the loss of your pet?
-

## Appendix D

## Interview Schedule

I am interested to know about what you remember of how your child or children experienced the loss of a pet.

Would you be able to explain your child/ren's relationship with \_\_\_\_\_ (pet's name)?

*Prompts:*

- Was \_\_\_\_\_ (pet's name) a significant part of your family?
- What kind of role did \_\_\_\_\_ (pet's name) play within your family? (friend, worker, helper, protector)
- What were some of your or your child/ren's favourite things about \_\_\_\_\_ (pet's name)?

Can you tell me about your child/ren's experience of the loss of \_\_\_\_\_ (pet's name)?

*Prompts:*

- How did \_\_\_\_\_ (pet's name) pass away? (accidental, illness, euthanasia)
- How did you explain \_\_\_\_\_ (pet's name) death to your child/ren?
- Did your child/ren ask many questions about \_\_\_\_\_ (pet's name) or about death in general?
- Did you notice any changes in behaviour? (sleeping, eating, school, socialising etc)
- Did your child/ren have time off school?
- If more than one child:
  - Did your children react differently to the loss?
  - Did older siblings help younger siblings to understand the loss of \_\_\_\_\_ (pet's name)?

How do you feel your child dealt with the loss?

*Prompts:*

- How would you describe the intensity of your child/ren's grief?
- How long do you feel your child/ren grieved over \_\_\_\_\_ (pet's name)?
- What kind of emotions do you feel were predominant following the death of \_\_\_\_\_ (pet's name)?
- What kind of coping strategies did your family use following the loss of \_\_\_\_\_ (pet's name)? (drawings, poems, burial ceremony, building headstone, scrapbooks etc)
- Do you feel your family received much social support (family, friends, coworkers, child's school) following the loss of \_\_\_\_\_ (pet's name)?

Appendix E  
Support Organisations

**Centrecare**

85 Boas Avenue  
Joondalup WA 6027  
Ph: (08) 9300 7300  
Website: [www.centrecare.com.au](http://www.centrecare.com.au)

**Lifeline**

Ph: 13 11 14

**Pets at Peace**

Ph: 1800 636 797  
Website: [www.petsatpeace.com.au](http://www.petsatpeace.com.au)

**RSPCA Animal Welfare Centre**

108 Malaga Drive  
Malaga WA 6090  
Ph: (08) 9209 9300  
Website: [www.rspcawa.asn.au](http://www.rspcawa.asn.au)

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## Appendix F

## Conceptually Ordered Matrix

Topic > Pseudonym	Explanation of death	Coping strategies	Social support
Parent: Anne  Children: Sarah (12)	My child was 12, she understood what had happened, I didn't have to explain it to her	We cried together and talked about it as a family and what had happened. We comforted each other. We have like a shrine. We actually had her cremated and put into an urn so we had that on display and we had a photo of her and a statue of a similar dog.	I know that Sarah's friends comforted her. And my co-workers were very considerate and they all understood, they all have pets, they all know what its like to lose a pet. But it was still hard even though we had support
Parent: Ben  Children: Sally (10)	I just said that animals, pets, don't live forever. That it's gone up to Jesus, to be with other pets that had died and stuff.	Yeah we buried it and then we said we would get another pet. We said we would get one to make them feel better.	Her grandparents and aunts and things comforted her a little bit, and her mum of course but that's about it. Yeah, I guess it would have made her feel better.
Parent: Candice  Children: Alley (5) Ken (3)	I told them that he was ill and he was in pain so the vet gave him a needle to put him to sleep. Then his soul left his body and went up to heaven, to be with other people or animals that have died. And that god was going to take care of him. I think it helped to know he wasn't really gone.	The kids drew some pictures, we talked about him. Eventually, probably two months later, my husband bought home another rabbit. When he did the kids said they were glad to have a new rabbit but they still loved and missed Floppy. They drew pictures and things and talked about him a lot.	Not really, I don't think people really think that a rabbit dying is a big deal. The vet was lovely, talking to my daughter when we had to put it down. He talked to her and told her why we had to leave him. But besides that, oh actually I think my daughters teacher was quite understanding too, coz she told her teacher about it.
Parent: Diana  Children: John (3)	Um, just that he had died. The concept of death was quite fresh as Rusty had died and a family friend had died and he was very accepting of that. No questions or anything.	A training teacher was in the classroom and she had pet mice. And he told her an impressive amount of information about Thomas and did lots of artwork about Thomas and it was all very	People were reasonably glad that the mouse was gone. He wasn't really that upset anyway. Maybe if it had of been a big deal then he may of need much more support, but it wasn't.

		positive so I feel quite sure that he dealt with it quite nicely, actually.	
Parent: Eleanor  Children: Peter (10) Adam (4) Sam (3)	Peter was there when he was given the injection. He saw Jake die. He knew that Jake was sick, I guess, so I didn't really have to explain. So he knew that Jake was dead, he saw him like that so it made it real.	A lot of cuddling and comforting and talking. My husband took Jake to my parents house and he and Peter buried him. It was good, a bit of closure. But he was really distraught when they buried him.	Yeah, most of our family have lost pets, they know what it is like. And Peter was so upset, that everyone, like his nanna and aunt really wanted to comfort him and make him feel better. The teachers were sympathetic and understanding. I guess it helped to have other people comfort him.
Parent: Fiona  Children: Jessie (4) Kyle (2)	Well they actually seen it.	Jessie I think dealt with it with just time. Over the next couple of weeks she just dealt with it. We ended up getting a new mouse so it kind of replaced it. We buried it. We put it in a shoe box and buried it out the back. I was there to comfort them.	They seemed to get over it. I was there to comfort them, so they had my support. But they forgot about it when we got a new mouse anyway.
Parent: Gemma  Children: Daniel(12) Jane (10)	They know what is death already because we had had other animals that had died. We tried not to say anything and later when we were alone we talked and knew that he had a better life now so we accept it.	Talking, crying, comforting.	No. Because no body even told us. We never got to talk about it because no body wanted to say anything. I think one year and a half later he died but then no body told us. We only found out four years later. It was really hard.
Parent: Hannah  Children: Joan (5)	I just said that dogs don't live forever. I explained heaven, doggy heaven. Where it is gorgeous and all flowers up there. She was quite happy with that, thinking that she had gone somewhere nice to be with her mum and dad and you know.	She did lots of pictures and things about her living with her family up in heaven and the things kids do. We got a puppy and then when the puppy came along It was over then. Pretty much the puppy came along and then it all started again. We got another dog. That pretty much cured it.	No. The vet was really the only one, because Joan was so upset and she was crying. He sent flowers just to Joan and said you know sorry you were so upset. He was really the only one. But I think we dealt with it pretty well. I think we sort of just did it as a family unit. Strong family unit.

<p>Parent: Ingrid</p> <p>Children: Kara (12) Ben (11)</p>	<p>I told them what had happened, exactly what had happened. I was going to lie about it. We had grandparents passed and you know. They were old enough to understand.</p>	<p>Pretty well, the older one has her own dog now, so that's cool. And I see her with her dog and to me it seems just like she replaced Harley. We had to take the things away then, to help us move on. We took the photos down. Slowly we put stuff back up. Then we got the urn back and we had a little shrine there. I spose we just talked a lot and yeah.</p>	<p>Oh yeah, my neighbours felt bad for us and everything else. Well yeh, because the kids in the street felt bad for the kids and would talk to them and help them out.</p>
<p>Parent: Jane</p> <p>Children: Melanie(11) Walter (9) Michael (3)</p>	<p>Um that he had just sort of gone to sleep under a tree and it was peaceful and he wasn't in pain. We had already sort of been through that before. They were old enough to understand. I explained to him that he is up there with his dad and he's playing ball with his dad. And he accepted that and was quite happy to know that his dog was with his dad and I just tried to make it as pretty as possible for him.</p>	<p>We sat and discussed it openly and I let them vent their emotions, I sort of let them say what they needed to say and answered all their questions. Lots of hugs, lots of talking, we talked it through. Lots of crying, we cried together. It seems to soothe him to know it was hurting me as much as it hurts him. That helped. But about twelve months later we got another dog, and that made him really angry because he saw that as a replacement.</p>	<p>Well it was hard because we were overseas. But I think he pretty much got enough support from home. But if we had of been home he would have got more cuddles from aunties and grandmas, but I suppose that was one of the reasons as well that it took him so long to get over it because he didn't have that support around him apart from us. So I suppose being in that situation it was hard to deal with, so but he got plenty of support from his immediate family.</p>

Topic >  Pseudonym	Part of family	Relationship with pet	Reactions to loss	Intensity & duration of grief
<p>Parent: Anne</p> <p>Children: Sarah (12)</p>	Yes	Very close with Bella.	<p>She was very distraught over the loss of the dog. Sadness, sense of loss. Took three days (off school).</p>	9/10, 12 months but still grieve today.
<p>Parent: Ben</p>	No	I guess my daughter liked playing with it. It was a type of friend, for the kids	<p>She was crying a lot. I guess at first she was shocked, she even said how maybe if she had of</p>	7/10, few days.

Children: Sally (10)		to play with.	given it more water it might be okay. Guilt. But overall she just cried when it happened and then forgot about it I think.	
Parent: Candice  Children: Alley (5) Ken (3)	No	They were both very attached to him, more so my daughter than my son. She spent a lot of time with him, every spare moment really. I think we all loved him very much.	Well my daughter showed fear of leaving him behind (at the vet), and of course they both were sad. They also longed for him I guess, like they missed him and wished he was still alive. My daughter also said we should have took better care of him so he didn't get sick, so I guess that's a little bit of guilt too.	Alley-6/10, Ken-3/10, few weeks.
Parent: Diana  Children: John (3)	No	He was very attached and saw Thomas as a pet even though there was no cuddling and that sort of stuff.	John just really zoned out as he is inclined to do. And really that was it, he didn't cry when I reported that Thomas had died. He said "Oh that's so sad" but he just steered clear. He was sad and low then once it happened he moved on.	2/10, only the day it happened.
Parent: Eleanor  Children: Peter (10) Adam (4) Sam (3)	Yes	Very close. Very close. He really loved that dog. Peter, I think he was attached to Jake like the others weren't, I guess they might have been a bit young. He was always there for Peter, we had had Jake since Peter was a little boy so I guess that's why he was so fond of him.	Peter, he was the only one who really got upset by Jake's death. They weren't close to Jake. Peter yeah, he used to get upset at night and cry himself to sleep. He just got very sad over it. Real, real sad. It lasted for months and then when he used to get upset about other things he used to talk about Jake all the time. Peter had time off school, a few days.	Peter-10/10, others-0/10. Many years, until today.
Parent: Fiona  Children: Jessie (4) Kyle (2)	No	They loved it coz they thought it was cute and cuddly. And they always played with it. All the time. Yeah I think a friend to Jessie and Kyle. They just loved watching him.	Kyle sort of didn't understand coz he was a bit little, but Jessie was kind of a bit upset. And she actually tried hurting the other pet in revenge. She became upset and a bit violent. Jessie seemed upset and acted a little violently, by trying to hurt the other mouse, but Kyle didn't really care.	Jessie-4/10, Kyle-0/10, two days.

Parent: Gemma  Children: Daniel(12) Jane (10)	Yes	Well they were very very close. Because he was so intelligent and he was so special. He was apart of the family. He really was very very special.	It was very sad. Because little Jane, she cried a lot. And Daniel really didn't want to have another pet after that. Well they just accept it. With a lot of pain, but they accept it. When we found out he died, it was very sad and we cried a lot but now he is okay. He is sleeping and we don't have to worry. He is not in pain.	Both chn-9/10, until today.
Parent: Hannah  Children: Joan (5)	Yes	Like another sibling. She was like another child. They did everything together. The one she was born in the house too, she had sort of grown with.	We just have to put her down, its time for her to go to sleep. And she accepted that, she knew she was in a lot of pain. She was sad, very sad. Just mostly sadness, she wasn't shocked or anything because she knew it was happening because we talked about it a lot. It was sad. Joan was so upset and she was crying and crying and I miss her I miss her.	8/10, three weeks.
Parent: Ingrid  Children: Kara (12) Ben (11)	Yes	He was like the forth child so to speak. They liked playing with him. They did everything with him. Sibling.	Um, quite dramatically actually. People would forget. It took a while to get used to him not being there. But I spose they all acted differently but yeh all upset. A lot of anger I suppose, and just why.	Both chn-9/10, eight months but still grieve today.
Parent: Jane  Children: Melanie(11) Walter (9) Michael (3)	Yes	Well Melanie wasn't too close with Dougal, but Walter was and Michael was just a baby so he wouldn't really remember him anyway. Walter was very very close with him.	Melanie was like a little bit upset but bounced back pretty quick smart. But Walter on the other hand didn't. He was devastated. Walter was just angry; he was just short for a while. But he came out of it eventually. He sort of snapped out of it but its still with him today. Walter was more in your face and confronting about it. He accepted that and was quite happy to know that his dog was with his dad and I just tried to	Melanie-5/10, Walter-9/10, Michael-0/10, until today.

			make it as pretty as possible for him. Mitch he didn't, he was just a baby really, a toddler. He didn't even know we had a dog, he didn't remember.	
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