What to say when you tell your toddler the pet died

"Our cat died this morning. My three-year-old keeps asking when Biscuit is coming home. I told her Biscuit went away. What do I say?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Biscuit went away for a while."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"Biscuit died. Her body stopped working. She can't move or eat or purr anymore, and she won't come back. We're sad, and we miss her."

"Went away" is meant to be gentle. To a three-year-old it is a promise: things that go away come back, so she waits, and asks.

What the experts advise

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry's guidance on the death of a pet says that vague or inaccurate explanations meant to protect children can create anxiety, confusion and mistrust. It suggests simple, honest words that fit what a young child can understand, such as that the pet stopped moving, can't see or hear anymore and won't wake up. It notes that children of three to five often see death as temporary and possibly reversible, so they may need the explanation more than once.

A review of research on children's understanding of death described three ideas children have to learn: that death is permanent, that the body stops working, and that every living thing dies. Most children in the studies reviewed understood all three by about five to seven. At three, your child is near the start.

The American Academy of Pediatrics adds that toddlers may ask again and again where the pet is, or seem unconcerned, and that this is not insensitivity.

What the words do

Take 2 uses the word "died" and then explains it in body terms a toddler knows: moving, eating, purring. "She won't come back" answers the real question. "We're sad, and we miss her" shows her that sadness is allowed in your home. When she asks again tomorrow, the same words are the right answer.

Grief comes and goes, and there is no set time for it. If months later your child is still struggling at home or school, sleeping badly or seems deeply sad, talk to your pediatrician or GP. If your child talks about hurting themselves, or anyone is in danger, contact your local emergency services; the support page lists crisis lines.

If you live in two homes

If the pet lived in one home, your child may grieve in the other home too, or only there. Tell the other parent what happened and the words you used, so your child hears the same honest story in both places. A photo or a drawing of the pet can travel between homes.

In the UK

In England and Wales, a child arrangements order may set out who a child lives with and when they spend time with each parent (older orders say "residence" and "contact"). Cafcass in England (Cafcass Cymru in Wales) advises the family court about what is safe for children; for everyday parenting questions, Coram Family Lives (England and Wales, 0808 800 2222) is free and confidential. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

1. American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (2017). Death of pets: Talking to children. Facts for Families, No. 78.
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3. Speece, M. W., & Brent, S. B. (1984). Children's understanding of death: A review of three components of a death concept. Child Development, 55(5), 1671–1686.
4. Cafcass (n.d.). About us. Retrieved November 9, 2026.
5. UK Parliament (2014). Children and Families Act 2014, section 12: Child arrangements orders.
6. Department for Education (2014). The Children and Families Act 2014 (Transitional Provisions) Order 2014, SI 2014/1042, article 6.
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8. Coram Family Lives (n.d.). Confidential helpline. Retrieved November 9, 2026.

This is general information drawn from published research and pediatric guidance. It is not medical, psychological or legal advice. If you are worried about your child, talk to your doctor.