emoGlow · Scripts

When a pet dies · Ages 5–7

What to say when you tell your six-year-old the dog was put down

"Our old dog had to be put down yesterday. My six-year-old asks if it hurt and if it was the vet's fault. What do I tell her?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"The vet put Max to sleep. He's sleeping now."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"Max was very old and very sick, and his body was hurting. The vet helped him die peacefully, without pain. It wasn't anyone's fault. It's okay to be sad, and to miss him."

"Put to sleep" is a kind phrase for adults. To a six-year-old, sleep is what she does every night, and what Max is now doing forever is not the same thing.

What the experts advise

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry says it is important to be honest when telling children a pet has died, and that vague or inaccurate explanations can create anxiety, confusion and mistrust. It suggests answers that are simple, honest and matched to the child's understanding, letting children say goodbye where possible, and reassuring them that missing a pet is normal. No study we know of has tested the phrase "put to sleep" itself; the guidance is about being concrete and true.

A review of research on how children understand death found that most children in the studies understood its main ideas (it is permanent, the body stops working, and every living thing dies) by about five to seven. Your six-year-old may be in the middle of learning this, which is why her questions are so direct.

The American Academy of Pediatrics notes that school-age children can understand much more than younger ones, that anger is a common part of grief, and that a small memorial can help a child say goodbye.

What the words do

Take 2 answers her two questions directly: it didn't hurt, and it wasn't anyone's fault. "The vet helped him die" uses the real word and keeps the vet a helper, not a villain. "It's okay to be sad" makes room for whatever comes next, including the same questions again.

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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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.