What to say when your eleven-year-old's pet dies

"Our eleven-year-old's guinea pig died while he was at school. He's angry with us and says we should have noticed. What do I say?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"It was just a guinea pig. We'll get you another one at the weekend."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"You loved Pip, and you're angry and sad. That makes sense. We didn't see he was ill, and I wish we had. How do you want to say goodbye?"

"It was just a guinea pig" is said to shrink the loss. To an eleven-year-old who fed him every morning, it says the loss doesn't count, and the anger has nowhere to go but you.

What the experts advise

The American Academy of Pediatrics' guidance on pet loss says that letting children feel sad helps them build skills for coping in the future, that anger is a common way grief shows itself, and that grief can come and go without warning. It suggests following your child's lead on questions and on any memorial, and says a small goodbye can really help. It adds that there is no set timeframe for how long a child grieves.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry adds that it is usually best not to replace a pet right away, and that there is no single right way to mourn.

A case report in the journal Death Studies described a child's grief for a dog and argued that parents should not trivialise a pet's death, because to a child the pet is often a member of the family. It is one family's story, not a study of many, but it fits the guidance.

What the words do

Take 2 names both feelings, anger and sadness, and says they make sense. "We didn't see he was ill, and I wish we had" is honest without being a confession that invites more blame. Asking how he wants to say goodbye gives him something to do with the grief, on his terms. A new guinea pig can wait.

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

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6. Department for Education (2014). The Children and Families Act 2014 (Transitional Provisions) Order 2014, SI 2014/1042, article 6.
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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.