Letter to Editor

Children's Grief for Pets: Rethink Supportive Approaches

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Introduction

International organizations report that nearly half of households in developing countries own at least one pet. Pets often function as family members for children, providing affection, companionship, and emotional security. Research indicates that children develop deep emotional attachments to their pets, and these bonds, expressed through affection and proximity, can resemble secure human attachment [1]. For children, interactions with pets offer numerous benefits, including better physical health, increased physical activity, reduced parental concerns regarding temperament, behavior, and learning abilities, and improved emotional regulation [2]. Longitudinal studies have shown that having a family pet may protect children from developing socio-emotional difficulties, particularly those without siblings [3]. One consequence of the high prevalence of pet ownership in childhood is that many children inevitably experience the death of a pet [4]. For many children, pets represent more than a companion; they are experienced as a meaningful attachment figure. Therefore, its loss can trigger complex grief reactions [5]. Research has demonstrated that grief following the death of a pet can be comparable in intensity and nature to that following the death of a human loved one. Approximately 7.5% of individuals may exhibit symptoms of prolonged or complicated grief following such losses [6]. Systematic reviews further indicate that grief after pet loss may involve guilt, social withdrawal, attempts to re-establish the bond with the deceased pet, and other complex emotional responses. These reactions are often described as disenfranchised grief, meaning grief that is not socially acknowledged and may be intensified by minimization or invalidation [7]. Children who lose a beloved pet may experience many of the same grief-related emotions as adults, including sadness, hopelessness, anger, longing, and loneliness.

From a clinical perspective, neglecting or minimizing grief resulting from the death of a companion animal in children may lead to significant and enduring psychological consequences. In this context, the risk of impaired academic functioning, increased behavioral difficulties, and the emergence or exacerbation of mood and anxiety disorders may increase. The absence of emotional validation and appropriate supportive interventions can contribute to the chronicity of grief responses and adversely affect a child's socio-emotional developmental trajectory over the long term.

Although childhood grief has been widely examined in the context of parental or familial loss, pets represent some of the earliest meaningful attachment rela-

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tionships outside the human family for many children. However, the psychological consequences of losing such emotional bonds remain underrepresented in the scientific literature. This letter highlights the importance of addressing grief related to pet loss in children and the need for greater research and clinical focus on this overlooked issue.

Recommendations for research, education, and intervention:

- Conducting epidemiological research: Future studies should determine the prevalence of pet-loss grief among children, identify key risk factors (e.g. type and duration of pet ownership, child attachment style, and history of psychological disorders), and examine children's compensatory coping patterns. Researchers should recognize pet loss as a legitimate context for grief, incorporate it into longitudinal and cross-cultural studies of childhood bereavement, and distinguish between normative sadness and clinically significant distress accompanied by functional impairment.

- Integrating pet-loss grief into clinical training: Child psychologists, counselors, and child psychiatrists should be trained to include pet-loss grief in diagnostic assessments and interview protocols. Clinical reference texts and specialized training programs should provide guidelines, assessment tools, and intervention strategies for this type of grief. Mental health professionals, pediatricians, and educators should explicitly address how to talk to children about pet death, how to support parents in offering honest yet sensitive explanations, and how to identify children who may require additional support.

Furthermore, brief, low-intensity, evidence-based interventions should be developed and evaluated, such as narrative therapy, school-based group activities, and family rituals to validate the child's grief, facilitate meaning-making, and strengthen resilience. Future research should specifically examine grief processes in children, emphasizing developmental differences in understanding death, the role of parents, and social support. Rehabilitation programs and support groups for children grieving the loss of a pet should be designed. Examples include child-friendly books, family-based group therapy, and counseling sessions using play therapy, bibliotherapy, and nature-based psychotherapy (nature-based therapy).

Supportive and educational interventions:

"Empowering parents, teachers, counselors, and children through educational tools and specialized workshops is the key to effective support on this path. These programs should include education about death, assistance in expressing emotions, and fostering open dialogue. In this regard, alongside the emotional support of parents and other relatives, as well as soothing the child with the help of peers, maintaining familiar routines and utilizing creative strategies—such as drawing, printing, and preserving memorial photos and videos, keeping the pet's toys, and retaining some of the animal's personal items—can help the child process emotions and recall fond memories. Establishing such memorial rituals (such as recording the animal's birth and death dates) and a support network facilitates the healing process and acceptance of loss, allowing memories to be cherished."

Although legal systems and protective regulations regarding animals vary across countries, an increasing trend in keeping companion animals has been observed. This phenomenon, which is becoming increasingly prevalent among children, plays a significant role in mental health and the formation of emotional bonds and attachments during childhood. The attachment and dependence of the child on the animal can have positive effects, and sometimes they may have negative, destructive consequences.

Positive effects include increased responsibility, strengthened social and emotional skills, reduced tension and anxiety, improved physical activity, non-judgmental companionship. Negative effects include physical and health hazards, allergies and sensitivities, grief and sorrow caused by loss, lack of time and neglect of certain individual and social issues, burden and long-term financial costs, negative impact on concentration or school schedules, and fear and anxiety regarding the unpredictability of the animal.

Despite these issues, some parents choose to get pets for their children. This process sometimes occurs with consultation and sometimes without the advice of experts in the field of children (child psychologists, child psychiatrists, counselors, educators, teachers, etc.) or animals (veterinarians). A crucial issue is the psychoemotional impact of the child's attachment to the animal; this experience can place pressure on the child in situations of the animal's loss or illness or, conversely, contribute to the development of resilience. In any case, the opinions of experts in child development and

animal behavior are sometimes positive and sometimes cautionary, depending on the specific circumstances of the family. In fact, sometimes experts refer to this event as an "experience" that can be part of a child's growth, but at other times they consider the experience of death at a young age to be inappropriate for the child. Ultimately, decision-making should be based on a precise evaluation of benefits and risks, and in consultation with experts.

However, animals (whether pets, livestock, or strays) are part of the "microsystem," or the close circle surrounding the child, and have a profound impact on their growth and sense of security; therefore, attention must be paid to the child's relationship with animals [8]. Although culture and ethnic background shape how humans view animals and their relationships with them, a child's relationship with an animal stems from pure nature. Therefore, the loss of an animal creates heavy grief for the child. Because the child's relationship with the animal is not merely a simple interest, but rather an "important and study-worthy phenomenon [8]."

Grief and grief patterns (such as denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) in children regarding the loss of an animal are more important today than ever before, as children establish a deeper emotional connection with animals than adults. Although some individuals, including parents and other relatives, may refer to it as disenfranchised grief or "disenfranchised grief"—grief that is not validated by society—the child faces this grief, and it is hard and painful for them to deal with. Because the experience of grief in childhood is one of the child's first experiences of confrontation (with loss), it is necessary to provide approaches and procedures for managing this confrontation. In this regard, we can benefit from proper counseling, self-control, emotion management, and even the continuing bond approach (the physical and spiritual presence of deceased animals in the lives of their owners), guiding the child to adopt a correct attachment style with the animal, adapting the grief experience to the child's development, paying attention to the influence of parents, and employing coping mechanisms [9, 10].

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