The Death of a Pet May Cause Mental Health Issues in Kids

The loss can deeply affect children's psychological development, regardless of socioeconomic status or adversities they've experienced.

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About 63% of children lose their beloved pets in the first seven years of their lives. While having a pet can benefit kids' overall health, the death of a pet can also trigger mental health problems, suggest new findings published in the journal European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, according to a press release from Massachusetts General Hospital.

For the study, researchers used a population-based sample of 6,260 children from Bristol, England, to track youngsters up to 8 years old who had experienced the death of a pet. Results showed that mental health issues occurred in children when they lost a pet regardless of their socioeconomic background or hardships they'd experienced.

Given the findings of previous research, scientists were surprised to learn that these mental woes were more evident in boys compared with girls. The death of a pet during childhood and the likelihood of psychological problems were also independent of when the incident happened or how many times a child had experienced such a loss.

The study confirmed the strong bond children form with pets at a very early age and the impact of such a connection on kids' development.

"One of the first major losses a child will encounter is likely to be the death of a pet, and the impact can be traumatic, especially when the pet feel likes a member of the family," said Katherine Crawford, a certified genetic counselor and the study's lead author. "We found this experience of pet death is often associated with elevated mental health symptoms in children and that parents and physicians need to recognize and take those symptoms seriously, not brush them off."

Investigators advised parents to observe their kids closely following the death of a pet, especially when they experience deeper, more profound and prolonged grief, which could be signs that a child's sorrow is more complex. Sympathetic and therapeutic conversations might help, Crawford suggested.

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