



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

EQUINE CENTER

Helping Kids Cope with the Death of a Horse

By Jeannine Moga, M.A., M.S.W., LICSW

Guiding children through the death of a horse can be daunting. While many parents struggle with decisions about how (and how much) to talk about death with their kids, not talking about the death of a loved one can actually make the grieving process more difficult for children and adults alike. This is especially true when the death of a horse is a child's first experience with loss.

One of the most important things to remember is that children of all ages need simple, honest information about when a death has occurred and what death looks like. When discussing the death of a horse, use concrete words to describe what happens to the body during the process and avoid the use of jargon or "soft" terms. For instance, younger children may need to know that bodies stop working when they die (bodies can no longer hear, feel, see, or taste). Older children may need to know what condition led the body to stop working and why that condition could not be fixed by the veterinarian.

Similarly, it is important to discuss euthanasia in simple terms. Avoid using euphemisms like, "having Rocket put down" or "putting Sunny to sleep," which can leave kids confused, or even scared, about what it means to sleep or rest. Instead, you may explain euthanasia as something veterinarians do just for horses who need help to die peacefully and without pain.

Additionally, there are a number of general guidelines for supporting children through the grieving process:

Offer to answer any question your child may have—even the silly, difficult, or complicated ones.

These questions may pop up at any point before or after the death of a beloved horse. Be as open as possible about the details your child needs to know, as those details may help them to make sense out of what has happened. There are many books geared toward answering kids' nitty-gritty questions about death (such as "what is cremation?" or "what happens after a body is buried?")

Give them choices about how they want to be involved.

While adults must bear the responsibility of making euthanasia decisions, children can still play a role in saying goodbye. If your family is preparing for the death of a horse, either through euthanasia or a "natural" death, explain what that death may look like and ask your child how he/she wants that goodbye to look and feel. Likewise, children can be given choices about whether they want to visit with the animal after death and how they want to be involved in burial or memorial rituals. A memento of the horse (forelock, piece of tack) that can be held close is often helpful during the initial stages of grief.

Listen without judgment.

There is no correct way to grieve, and children may have any number of responses to loss (including tearfulness, nervousness, sleep disturbance, and impaired concentration at school). In fact, it is not unusual for siblings within the same family to grieve the loss of a horse very differently. Invite each child to talk about the death of their horse and make sure they know their feelings are normal. Their horse was important to them, and it is okay to feel any number of ways when that horse is gone.

Support their grief, whatever the form.

Some children, especially those with less developed verbal skills, benefit from having nonverbal opportunities to process grief. Creating a scrapbook, drawing pictures, taking clippings of fur and/or mane hair, or making imprints of hoofs can give children an outlet for both their creativity and their feelings.

Let other caregivers know about the loss.

Teachers, child care staff, and other friends can be important sources of support for grieving children.

Make space for remembering.

Encourage children to share favorite stories about their horse and to remember the happiest

times with that horse. Those memories are part of the natural healing process and can provide great comfort months, and even years, after a horse's death.

Balance the grief with laughter and joy.

It is healthy to give ourselves a break from the deep sadness that comes from the death of a loved animal. In fact, taking a break from grief to do something fun may actually help facilitate the grief process. Laughter is a wonderful healing salve, so make sure your child knows that being able to laugh and have fun does not mean they love their horse any less.

Embrace routine.

The death of a loved horse is often very disruptive to a child's sense of safety and security. At such a difficult time, it can be comforting to know what to expect from each day. If your family has an established routine around mealtimes, bedtimes, chores, religious worship, and/or recreation, it will be important to maintain those routines now. It may even be helpful to integrate a ritual of remembrance into the daily routine. For instance, a family that spent part of every evening exercising or grooming their horse may choose to light a candle every evening in that horse's memory.