



# Supporting Children & Families through Pet Loss: A Brief Literature Review and Proposed PAWS™ Protocol: Psychoeducation & Group Work for Pet Loss *in fulfillment of requirement for Veterinary Social Work (VSW) Certificate*



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## 01. Introduction

Children have innate affinity for living things (i.e., biophilia theory)[1].



Children can and do form deep attachments with animals (i.e., attachment theory [2], however, with that love comes inevitable loss.



Pet loss is often children's first experience with loss, and first opportunity to learn about death as a part of life [3].



63% of kids with a pet will lose them before age 7 [4]; recent study shows 50% of children facing pet loss experience clinically significant grief [5].



Gaps in research and practice [6,7] represent a missed opportunity to support children and families as they experience the loss of their pet.

## 02. Objective

To conduct a literature search for published, peer-reviewed research on addressing pet loss and grief in children, and using available evidence, begin to fill the gap in practice by proposing an intervention to support children and their caregivers through their pet loss experience.

### 02a. Related Literature

*What can we learn from Adult Pet Loss?*

- One adult pet loss intervention identified [8], a 3-tier model, is there a benefit to a universal protection program for children?
  - **Tier 1:** 'universal protection' to avoid disenfranchised grief;
  - **Tier 2:** Therapy After the Loss of a Pet (TALP); 6-session CBT
  - **Tier 3:** Targeted Intervention (long-term grief therapy)
- The grief experience associated with pet death is similar to that associated with the loss of a significant human [9]; is it similar for children?



**There are no known, formal, research-based protocols to support children and their caregivers who face the loss of a family pet.**

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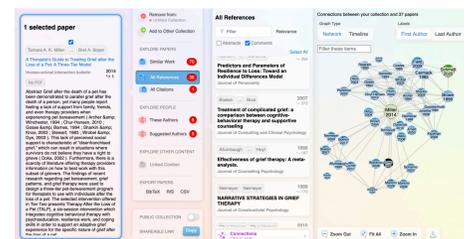
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## 03. Methodology

**Phase 1:** A brief literature review [10] identified 36 articles; of those, only two relevant:

- Therapy after the Loss of a Pet (TALP) and Pet Loss [8]
- Continuing Bonds in Children and Adolescents [5]

**Phase 2:** Given limited results, utilized Research Rabbit (AI) tool to visualize how articles fit into broader "lay of land."



**Phase 3:** Given no research on children and pet loss interventions; backward snowballing of references from the only known general intervention [8] and childhood pet loss coping research [5] to understand foundational research relevant to childhood pet loss and available interventions in pet loss field.

- of 71 papers, only 10 relevant to pet loss and children; none described an intervention for childhood pet loss;
- Findings, synthesized in Section 4, point to need for two-part intervention: an in-clinic psychoeducation and brief CBT plus follow on pet loss support group

#### References:

1. Wilson, E.O. (1984). *Biophilia*. Harvard University Press.
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3. Robin, M., & Benseit, R. ten. (1985). Pets and the Socialization of Children. *Marriage & Family Review*, 8(3–4), 63–78.
4. Crawford, K. M., Zhu, Y., Davis, K. A., Ernst, S., Jacobsson, K., Nishimi, K., Smith, A. D. A. C., & Dunn, E. C. (2021). The mental health effects of pet death during childhood: Is it better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all? *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 30(10), 1547–1558. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00287-020-01594-5>
5. Schmidt, M., Naylor, P. E., Cohen, D., Gomez, R., Moses, J. A., Respoport, M., & Pickman, W. (2020). Pet loss and continuing bonds in children and adolescents. *Death Studies*, 44(5), 278–284. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2018.1541942>
6. S. Brackenridge, personal communications, January 24, 2025.

## 04. Results: Synthesis

Literature reveals need for supporting children through pet loss to decrease grief, adapt to loss, and support parents in helping their children through what is likely their first experience with loss.

Literature reports that:

1

– Half of children who experienced pet loss experienced clinically significant grief [5]

2

–Children grieved more for their lost pets than adults [11] & pet loss can lead to disorganization of family functioning [12]



3

–The power of caregivers, especially mothers, to provide the opportunity for children to symbolically express grief, and validate and normalize the child's expression of grief [5]

4

– Children use "continuing bonds (CB) activities" following pet loss; internalizing CB activities more positive impact on adapting [5]

5

–The bond with the pet predicts intensity of grief; girls more likely to have more intense bereavement symptoms [13]

## 05. Conclusion: Proposed PAWS™ Intervention

Processing and Adapting With Support (PAWS) proposes a two-phased approach to support children and caregivers that incorporates research on the importance of caregiver role in supporting children through the loss and provides opportunity to complete continuing bonds activity, through two modalities:



**PSYCHOEDUCATION w/CBT Elements**  
In-veterinary-clinic brief psychoeducation to support parents and children via parent handout (Supporting Children Through Pet Loss) and Child Homework Journal (with coping skills list, record thoughts and feelings)



**PET LOSS SUPPORT GROUP**  
Community-based child and caregiver focused support group to help children and their caregivers get support in processing their pet loss experience.

## 06. PAWS™ Group Structure

The 90-minute support group includes four parts:

### Part 1: Welcome and Shared Opening (15 min)

**Goal:** Set safety, name the loss, foster connection.

- Introductions: names + pet's name + something pet loved
- Grounding exercise (e.g. "paw print on heart")
- Normalize pet loss, emotions, read *I'll be Your Friend Forever*

### Part 2: Child & Caregiver Parallel Tracks (30 min)

#### Children's Activity Group (with Facilitator A)

**Goal:** Express feelings and memories using developmentally appropriate activities. Draw or write a letter to pet, make a memory page, decorate a "feeling paw" and group processing as they work ("Does anyone else feel that way?")

#### Caregiver Group (with Facilitator B)

**Goal:** Provide psychoeducation and emotional support. Topics include: children grieve differently by age/stage, signs of complicated grief, continuing bonds are healthy and helpful, ways to model and support open conversations. Brief reflection activity: "What do I want to say to or remember about our pet?"

### Part 3: Reconnection Activity (30 min)

**Goal:** Reinforce connection and create shared meaning; bring dyads back together - each pair chooses 1 of 3 collaborative activities: create a stepping stone or small art piece; co-write a letter to the pet or create a shared memory book page; plant a seed in a pot together ("growing our love" metaphor)

### Part 4: Closing Ritual (15 min)

**Goal:** Affirm, honor, and transition out of group. Each child (optional caregiver too) shares a memory, artwork, or what they made; read short affirmation or poem; offer take-home handout with: coping tips; ways to honor pet at home (e.g., memory walk, light a candle); "PAWS Plan" worksheet with space to write how they will remember the pet together. Thank everyone for the honor of sharing pets with facilitators.



7. E. Allen, personal communications, January 27, 2025.
8. Miller, T. A. K., Prout, M. F., Rourke, M., Lefkowitz, C., & Boyer, B. (2014). A Therapist's Guide to Treating Grief after the Loss of a Pet: A Three-Tier Model. *Human-Animal Interaction Bulletin*, December 1. <https://doi.org/10.1029/hai.2014.0007>
9. Hunt, M. and Padilla, Y. (2006) Development of the pet bereavement questionnaire. *Anthrozoos*, 19(4), 308–324.
10. Databases searched included APA PsycINFO, Medline, CINAHL, Alt HealthWatch, Public Affairs Index, SocINDEX, Agricola and PubMed.
11. Jaromien, J. (1998). A Comparison of the Grief Reaction of Children and Adults: Focusing on Pet Loss and Bereavement. *OMEGA – Journal of Death and Dying*, 37, 133-150.
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