

Our family dog was just diagnosed with cancer. My husband and I don't know how to tell our children. Do you have any advice on this tough subject?

I am very sorry to hear about your dog. Every family has to consider their personal beliefs prior to this type of discussion and you may agree or disagree with some of the advice I will provide. The age and maturity of your children will play a large role in how your children react to the news.

It is important to find a quiet place, free from distractions to have the conversation. If your children are different ages, you may want to tell them separately as they might not all understand what is happening as quickly.

If your pet is acting normally but cancer has been found somewhere in the body, your children may not believe you. It is important to explain what your veterinarian has found and that your veterinarian is trying to do everything they can to make sure your pet is comfortable and not in pain. It is also important to explain that your pet will never get better, regardless of what you try to do. If euthanasia is near, it would be best to explain you are doing the kindest thing to stop any pain and that your pet will die peacefully, without feeling hurt or sad. Of course if you do euthanize your pet, it is important not to use the phrase "going to sleep". This can cause young kids to have misconceptions about sleep or surgery and anesthesia.

Stick to the truth and avoid lying about the situation. Saying your pet "ran away" or "went on a trip" will not alleviate the sadness about losing the pet. Also, when the truth comes out, your child will likely be angry that you lied.

A tough part is explaining what happens after your pet dies. Draw from your own understanding of death and your faith to answer. It is ok to say, "I don't know" and that death is a mystery. Also, the Rainbow Bridge poem is a great poem that can help explain the afterlife for pets.

Don't feel compelled to hide your sadness and be sure to express to your children that is OK to be sad. Allow them to have their own special way to remember your dog. Maybe you will bury the pet as a family or have a memorial to talk about your memories or read poems the children have written. Scrapbooks with photos are also a great way to help kids through the loss. Your veterinarian may also have a book they can lend you to help explain death in pets to your children.

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