Arthur Connor reluctantly called his two children, Michelle and Andrew, into the family room. He was about to embark on his least favorite activity of the week, one he had not been looking forward to, yet one he knew was important and necessary.

Vanessa, his wife, sat across the room with tears in her eyes as the children entered.

“Why are you crying, Mom?” asked Michelle.

“That is what we wanted to talk to you about,” their father responded. His tone was a clear signal to the children that this was not going to be a typical family meeting.

Both children quickly sat down next to their mom. Somber and quizzical looks fell upon their faces. Arthur took a deep breath and continued, “It’s our dog, Tiffany. She has been very sick the past several days and we think her body is shutting down.”

“Is she going to die?” Andrew interrupted.

“Yes,” replied Arthur, softly and honestly, “but we’re not sure when.” Tears formed instantly in both children’s eyes and they immediately sought refuge in the warm and loving arms of their mother.

As his wife and two children snuggled together, Arthur continued. “Tiffany has been a part of our family for a long time. She was with your mom and me before either of you were born. Tiffany has been a loving part of our lives for over fourteen years. So to honor her life with us and celebrate her contributions to our family we want to spend time together tonight saying goodbye to Tiffany.

The family gathered around Tiffany, who was on her soft bedding in the corner of the room. For two hours the family members told stories, took pictures, laughed, and cried. They held, snuggled, and brushed their golden retriever companion. Each person had a chance to say goodbye and gain closure to this significant part of their lives in their own
way. One shared a story about Tiffany’s first day as a member of the family. Another simply patted her head and rubbed her ears softly as more stories were told.

The evening ended with a group picture, a family hug around the beloved pet, and a salute to Tiffany’s gift of life that she shared with this family.

The following day Tiffany died as Arthur had anticipated. A burial ceremony took place in the family’s backyard. More crying occurred as another round of saying goodbye ensued. The ritual ended with the four family members gathered in a circle around the burial spot thanking Tiffany for all she had given.

What the Connor family experienced is not unique to them. Many families, if they haven’t already, will at one point or another have to say goodbye to a family pet. How the Conners handled this important experience with their children gives helpful clues as to how to effectively approach this delicate situation. More ideas follow. You may find them useful when faced with a similar situation.

1. Don’t attempt to hide the death or pending death of a pet. Instead, embrace the moment with honesty, gentleness, and love.

2. Answer questions at an age-appropriate level. Help the younger children begin to grasp a different understanding of death by talking about it in a more concrete, physical way. For example, talk about how death happens when the heart muscle gets tired and stops working or how the body wears out, slows down, and can’t go on anymore.

3. Honor how each person is feeling. Let it be okay to cry, laugh, and then cry some more. Sadness and laughter can happen at the same time. One can remember a fun moment together while being sad at the loss. Sometimes, for children, the laughter is nervous anxiety coming out. It is not necessarily a sign of disrespect. Children might get angry or mad at God for taking their pet. Do not attempt to talk children out of their feelings. Just be there and hear and acknowledge the feelings. Whatever feelings are there, allow them to flow.

4. Be willing to show your emotions. This is not a time to tough it out. Model for your child how a mature person expresses anger, sadness, and frustration with loss. Let them see that big boys and big girls do indeed cry. Help your children see that it is okay to be sad.

5. People mourn and are sad in different ways. As with the Connor family, some may want to talk about the loved one, while others want to sit quietly. It is important to let everyone feel the sadness in their own way.

6. Be together through the sadness. The pet was a family pet and the family can support one another in their shared sadness. If one family member wants some
alone time, there will be plenty of opportunity for that later. It is important that you say goodbye together as a family.

7. Share memories. If it’s a small lizard, remember the times you purchased crickets for its meals. Talk about the big-eyed goldfish and cleaning its tank for the first time. Share a memory of how the family cat would pounce on your feet at night. Reminisce, talk about what you will miss, what you won’t miss, humorous incidents, and frustrations. Talk, share, and remember.

8. Celebrate and concentrate on what the pet gave to the family, not on what the family is losing. This is a time to remember what the family pet brought to you. It could be companionship on morning walks, a wagging tail that always greeted you at the door, the familiar whine to wake you in the morning, someone to take care of, someone who seemed to take care of you. The family pet was there for you as much as you were there for it. Remember and honor that contribution at this important time.

9. Create a ceremony to say goodbye and gain closure. The ceremony can be based on your religious upbringing, a spiritual principle that the family embraces, or a procedure to dispose of or bury the body. The key is to mark the moment as an important point in time where you gave your respect and honor to a beloved member of the family.

10. Realize that some family members may continue to cry and be sad for several days. Don’t attempt to move someone quickly through the mourning process. It is a different experience for each person and takes a different amount of time for each as well. Your children may move in and out of sadness and grieving. Be encouraging and uplifting as they struggle with understanding the concept of death.

11. Do not immediately replace the deceased pet. Some well-intentioned parents provide a new puppy or kitty to help the children feel better. This cheats children by not letting them complete the grieving process and teaches them that if anything ever happens to them they will be easily and quickly replaced. A new family pet can come later, when everyone has closure on the previous experience and is ready for a new one.

Perhaps the Connor family story strikes a familiar chord in your heart. We all know that death is not the easiest topic to address with our children. Yet we realize that one day we will probably face this issue. It is our hope that the ideas shared above will in some way help you and your children as you say goodbye to your family pet.

Chick Moorman and Thomas Haller are the authors of The Only Three Discipline Strategies You Will Ever Need: Essential Tools for Busy Parents. They are two of the world’s foremost authorities on raising responsible, caring, confident children. They publish free parent and educator newsletters. To subscribe to the newsletters or obtain
information about how they can help you or your group meet your parenting needs, visit their websites today: www.chickmoorman.com and www.thomashaller.com.