



Bucket Calf Mortality (A Guide for Adults)

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service • Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources

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The 4-H Bucket Calf Project is designed to introduce youth 7-12 years-old to beef and dairy 4-H projects. By allowing younger children the experience of working with a smaller, less intimidating size of animal, they become comfortable with beef and dairy cattle as they grow. This is designed to be a short-term project with calves purchased in May and finalized with showing at the local county fair.

A bucket calf is an orphan or newborn calf purchased when they are one to ten days old. The calves may be male or female, beef or dairy. The calves are started on a bottle (or bucket) and nipple.

Calves should be purchased between May 1 and May 30 of the current year. Calves may be purchased off the farm from dairy or beef producers. Also, livestock auctions sell newborn to week old calves.

Baby calves have immature immune systems and are highly susceptible to disease and stress. A newborn calf may become deathly ill in a matter of hours. There are many things that can be done to prevent disease and illness see 4-H publication No.136 [Keeping Your Bucket Calf Healthy](#).

However, despite all efforts to keep a calf healthy, it sometimes dies.

Dealing with Death

This may be a child's first experience with death. The shock of finding the calf dead can be very emotional. Children of different ages handle this experience in different ways. If the child has become emotionally attached to the bucket calf, the sudden loss may be more traumatic than for an adult.

Depending on how attached the child is to the calf, he/she may take longer to "get over" the loss than an adult. A short time of depression, acting out, or gloominess can be expected and should go away. Reaction to the death varies by the age of the child, emotional maturity, and circumstances involved in the death. Here are some age guidelines for recognizing grief in children.

Children 7-8

Seven to 8-year-olds frequently experience sadness with the loss of a pet. If this is their first experience with death, they may fear for their own safety. Bedtime may be extremely

stressful because of their fear that a family member may die. They may also feel deprived and show this by clinging or by asking for new possessions.

Children 9-10

Nine to 12-year-olds often feel an overwhelming sense of loss. They can feel pride, embarrassment, anger, and sorrow, all within a relatively short time. Each day can be a roller coaster of emotions — one minute up and another minute down. They may worry about how the separation or loss will affect their future on a practical, day-to-day basis.

Children 11-12

Children this age can understand the reasons for the separation, but they often have limited skills for handling strong, negative emotions. They often distance themselves as a defense against more pain, and attempt to hide their feelings in a whirlwind of activities.

How adults can help

Tell the truth. Children can handle it better than adults realize. The sooner you explain things, the better. Offer love and reassurance that they are not the cause of the loss, and that you will be there to help them. It is important never to belittle or ignore the child's concept of relationship with the calf. Let them know it is alright to feel sad. Involve them in other activities that lift their spirits. Older children may need to talk to someone they can trust outside the family, like a minister, teacher, or 4-H leader. Try to identify someone willing to spend time with your child or include that person in some family activities.

Burial

Having a burial, memorial, or similar ceremony helps to finalize the death event. Children should be allowed to participate in any way they feel comfortable – helping mark the grave site, draw pictures, etc. – whatever activity fits with the closure ceremony and allows the child to say good-bye in their own way.

State Guidelines

Oklahoma has specific guidelines on livestock burial. Find a location that is 300 feet away from wells, springs, streams, or public areas. You must stay at least one quarter mile from an occupied house or public highway. Stay away from places that might erode. Dig a pit. After placing the body in the pit, cover with at least 2 feet of topsoil.

Getting a New Calf

If you still have time before the final date for purchasing bucket calves in your county, you may want consider purchasing another bucket calf. This is a very personal choice. Children should not be rushed into getting another calf to help them “get over” the previous one.

Helpful Reading

The Tenth Good Thing About Barney, by Judith Viorst.
A Special Place For Charlee, by Debby Morehead.
I'll Always Love You, By Hans Wilhelm.

References

Adapted from Janet Tobiassen Crosby, DVM. Time to Say Good-bye. Vetmedicine.about.com
Nebraska Cooperative Extension Fact Sheet NF 91-11 [Help Children Cope with Separation and Loss](#).

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Samuel E. Curl, Director of Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma. This publication is issued by Oklahoma State University as authorized by the Dean of the Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources. 0402 JS.