

SELECTING THE RIGHT PET FOR YOUR FAMILY

A Family Affair – Selecting the Right Pet for Your Child

For many kids, the family pet is their best friend—a companion who not only provides unconditional love, but who also teaches them about friendship, responsibility, loyalty, and empathy. While most family pets are cats and dogs, other animals can be wonderful additions to your home. Rabbits, hamsters, gerbils, guinea pigs, small birds, and fish can make great family pets, for instance, as long as they receive the specialized care they need. Even though these animals are smaller than a cat or dog, they require just as much attention and care.

The key to creating a true "family pet"—one who is gentle, loyal, and loving to both animals and people—is to treat the animal as a beloved family member and to provide the training and care he deserves. It's not enough to get a pet "for the kids." A pet is not a temporary playmate for children, but a lifelong family member who depends on the entire family, especially adults.

How old should my child be before we get a pet?

Although many experts recommend a child be at least six years old before a pet is brought into the family, you are the best judge of your child's maturity. At the very least, your child should exhibit self-control and understand (and obey) the word "no." If you think your child is ready for a pet, first introduce her to friends' well-behaved pets so you can observe your child's behavior around them.

Should we get a young animal or an older one?

Many families with young children choose a kitten or puppy, believing these pets are safer, easier to train, and more adaptable than older, larger pets. But this isn't always true. Because puppies and kittens are fragile, require extra time and care, and are prone to play-related scratching and biting, they may not be appropriate for a household with young children. Adopting a friendly, calm, adult animal who has a known history of getting along with young children may be the best choice for your family. Before making a decision, talk with animal experts such as veterinarians, animal trainers, and animal shelter adoption counselors who can help you select the right animal for your family.

What kind of dog is best with kids?

As a parent, you want your child to be safe around your dog. You want to know which breeds are good with children and which aren't. The truth is, all dogs have the potential to bite, and a dog's breed is only one of many factors that affect temperament and behavior. The best dogs for kids are those who receive proper socialization, humane training, exercise, and attention; who are given adequate food, water, shelter, and veterinary care; who are sterilized; and who are safely confined.

How should my child interact with pets?

To protect both your child and your pet, it's critical that an adult supervise all pet-child interactions. It's also important to help your child see the world through your pet's eyes. Ask your child how he would feel if someone poked at his eyes or pulled his ears. Explain that even the most docile pet has limits, and that all animals must be treated with caution and respect. Help your child understand that:

Pets need space and may not always welcome human attention, especially when eating, playing with their toys, or resting.

Pets may become upset by too much petting or stimulation. Teach your child to heed warning signs (such as hissing, lip curling, retreating, and growling) that indicate her animal friend wants to be left alone.

Other people's pets may feel and display discomfort if your child touches or even approaches them. Tell your child to get permission from an adult before touching another pet. Explain how some pets may feel threatened when stared at, cornered, or hugged.

Animals in pain may lash out or bite anyone who tries to touch them. Teach your child to leave an injured pet alone and to immediately notify an adult.

Some dogs get excited and may even become more dangerous when children scream and run. Teach your child appropriate behaviors around dogs.

Dogs contained in yards or cars may try to protect their territory if approached. Teach your child not to tease or get close to them.

How can I help my pet feel safe?

Pets, like children, need time to adjust to new surroundings and circumstances, and need opportunities for "down time." Provide pets with a place of their own where they can retreat from children. Don't put your pets in situations where they feel threatened. For example, dogs left alone in yards can be accidentally or intentionally teased by neighborhood children. What's more, pets live longer, healthier, and safer lives when kept indoors with the family.

How can my kid help care for a pet?

Allowing children to help care for a pet teaches responsibility and instills a feeling of competency and accomplishment. Choose tasks appropriate for the age of your child. Even young children can be involved in some aspect of caring for an animal friend—selecting a new toy or collar, assisting with grooming, or carrying a food can.

How can I teach my kids to take good care of pets?

The best way to teach your children how to be responsible pet caregivers is to be one yourself. This should start before you even get a pet—make sure you have realistic expectations about pet ownership. And take steps to select the right animal for your family at the right time.

As soon as you bring a pet into your family, set up and enforce rules regarding proper pet care. For example, tell your children not to pull the animal's tail, ears, or other body parts, and insist that they never tease, hit, or chase the pet. Teach children how to properly pick up, hold, and pet the animal. These simple lessons are essential to helping kids become responsible caretakers.

Although certain pet-care activities must be handled by adults, you can still include your children by explaining why and what you're doing. For example, when you take your pet to the veterinarian to be spayed or neutered, explain to your child how the operation not only reduces pet overpopulation but can also make your pet healthier, calmer, and more affectionate.

Also involve your children in pet-training activities, which not only make your pet a more well-mannered family member, but also teach your child humane treatment and effective communication.

Ultimately, your children will learn how to treat animals—and people—by watching how you treat the family pet. They'll study how you feed, pet, and exercise your companion animal. And they'll pay close attention to how you react when a pet scratches the furniture, barks excessively, or soils in the house. Frustrating as these problems are, "getting rid of" the pet isn't just unfair to the pet and your children, but it also sends the wrong message about commitment, trust, and responsibility. When faced with pet problems, get to the root of the problem. Often a veterinarian, animal shelter professional, or dog trainer can help you resolve pet issues so you can keep the whole family together.