



So you want to know more about...

Pets & Children

Best Friends

What do kids get from having pets?

- Companionship
- Responsibility
- Exercise

The benefits of having a pet are overwhelmingly positive. But some families are less than happy with their pet outcomes, usually due to a lack of forethought and planning. Before you even **visit** the pet store or animal shelter, consider:

Your child's age.

Get a pet that your child can physically manage. While adults in the family will be the primary caregivers (and ultimately responsible for the pet's well-being), you can and should delegate some care tasks. Children ages 4 and older can fill a bowl with kibble, but they won't do it without

reminders. Taking a dog for a walk or grooming a shaggy sheepdog are adult tasks, though kids can help. Very young children don't have the coordination and muscle control to handle small rodents and birds. It's unfair to all types and sizes of animals to allow very young children to handle them inappropriately.

Your family's lifestyle.

If both parents work full-time, you live in a small apartment or have no yard, or if you have a lot of fine furnishings you want to keep fine, a cat or dog may not be your ideal pet. Both need companionship and grooming; most breeds of dogs need considerable exercise. Some breeds of dogs and cats are not suitable for homes with small children. Even pets like hamsters

and gerbils need their cages cleaned regularly. Various breeds of cats and dogs shed more than others.

Your finances.

Purebred animals are almost always more expensive than mixed breeds. Initially, you're paying for the pedigree. Smaller animals eat less than big ones, though the quality and type of food are also factors. Some reptiles eat live crickets or even rodents! All animals need regular vet visits. When you travel, you'll need to pay for boarding or a pet-sitter.

The more you think about getting a pet before you start looking for one, the more rewarding the relationship will be for everyone.

Pet Prep School

Read a book and talk to your vet about the particular animal you're acquiring. Figure out what you'll need: bedding, a cage, food, leashes, etc. Older children love to participate in this kind of research and shopping.

Do a safety walk-through of your house. Puppies and kittens are likely to claim and chew anything left on the floor, including children's toys, remotes, and electrical cords. Provide scratch posts and other entertainment for cats. Put pet bowls and litter boxes in a place inaccessible to babies and toddlers, and designate a "safe" room (or crate) in your house where your puppy or kitten can be unsupervised when you are away.

Treat your pet as a family member. Schedule regular check-ups, grooming, and giving them appropriate exercise and nutrition. Having a pet costs money and requires a time commitment. Think as carefully about this addition to your family as you would before inviting a relative to move into your home.

Further reading

- *Cats for Dummies*, by Gina Spadafori and Paul Pion
- *Dogs for Dummies*, by Gina Spadafori
- *Puppies for Dummies*, by Sarah Hodgson

Finding Your Perfect Pet

Once you've decided which kind of pet will be a good addition to your family, where will you look for one?

- **Breeders.** Ask your veterinarian for names of reputable breeders, or contact the national organization for that particular animal (e.g., American Kennel Association). At the breeder's home, make sure the facility is clean, the animals look healthy and relaxed, and that the breeder cares who will be buying her animals.
- **Shelters.** There are many, wonderful animals at local shelters waiting to be adopted. It can be hard to discern temperament in a noisy, crowded shelter, so ask if you can take the animal for a walk on the grounds. Be sure to heed the shelter employees' advice about whether an animal is suitable for a home with active children, etc. They want to make owner-animal love connections and have everyone's interests at heart. Petfinders.com can help you locate shelter animals who are being fostered.

- **Rescue organizations** are another good way to find a purebred animal. Foster parents can advise you on temperament, handling, and training.
- **Classified Ads.** Sometimes you can find perfectly wonderful animals whose owners need to find them a new situation and don't want them to be euthanized at a shelter. Be wary of breeders that advertise in the newspaper. Most reputable ones don't need to.
- **Pet store** animals tend to be stressed and may not receive adequate attention, exercise, or veterinary care. They often come from puppy or bunny mills, and those animals are more likely to have health and emotional problems associated with overbreeding. A pet store is a good place to buy fish or gerbils and hamsters.

Do your homework before you look at any live animals so you can make an intelligent **and** heartfelt decision.

Health and Safety

More often than not, when animals hurt children it's inadvertent. If your child hugs your puppy fiercely and he feels trapped, he may give her a nip to get free. If your older pet hasn't been trained otherwise, it may think that your older child is a competitor or peer, someone to dominate. The important point here is that pets and children must be **supervised**. When you encounter other people's pets, always ask before approaching the animal. Watch the animal's body language throughout the interaction. If it seems scared or annoyed, back off. **Dogs (and owners!) should receive obedience training—at least an introductory class.**

Another health concern is the **transmission of disease**. Scratches are a quick way for germs to enter your child's bloodstream. Clean these with warm soapy water and cover with a bandage. Anything more than a surface scratch (or a

scratch that doesn't heal) needs to be evaluated by a physician. Other kinds of illness and roundworms can be spread when animals roll in or consume infected feces from other animals and then play with your child. Litter boxes should be out of children's reach, and children should make it a habit to **wash hands** after playing with cats, dogs, birds, and other pets. Don't let pets touch food prep surfaces. Reptiles are particular carriers of *salmonella* bacteria which can make young children very sick. Again, **handwashing** and **appropriate handling** of the animal and its wastes are critical.

Other health and safety concerns are **environmental**—a few bites of kibble won't hurt a child, but a pet can feel defensive and strike out if he catches your child in his bowl. Some plants are toxic for animals (and children) and some human food can make animals sick.

Frequently Asked Questions

My child won't stop hugging my cat. You should consider handling pets a privilege (like handling a fragile object in your house). Don't allow it if your child isn't doing so appropriately. Model good touches. Say, "one hand touch" to reduce the temptation to put the cat in a stranglehold. Sometimes a stuffed animal is a good way to practice soft touches or an appropriate alternative when things get a little too rough.

I am afraid of animals and concerned about my children playing with them when we visit people with pets. Try speaking with your host or hostess about your fears. If pets

are rambunctious, many owners prefer to confine them to another part of the house rather than inconvenience guests. Your host can also facilitate your child's interactions with the animals, if she's interested, and explain to you what's going on as it happens.

Doesn't having pets increase childhood allergies? Recent research indicates that children who grow up with pets in the home have a reduced risk of developing common allergies. Read more at: www.cnn.com/2002/HEALTH/parenting/08/27/kid.pet.allergies/index.html, or find a copy of the news article in our **Parent Library**.