

Children and Pets

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. 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.

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.

Teach your child to get permission from an adult before touching another animal. Explain how some animals may feel threatened when approached by someone they don't know

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. Teach your children when your pet is in this place they are to leave it alone. Don't put your pets in situations where they feel threatened. What's more, pets live longer, healthier, and safer lives when kept indoors with the family.

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

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 carrying a food can.

The best way to teach your children how to be responsible pet caregivers is to be one yourself. 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. Your children will 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. A pet is not a temporary playmate for children, but a lifelong family member who depends on the entire family, especially adults.

