



## Tips for Parents: Kids and Pets

*Considering adding a pet to your family? Children can learn responsibility from caring for an animal, and pets can be affectionate and fun. But before you make a trip to the pet store, here's what you need to know:*

### **The Benefits of Pet Ownership**

Having a pet in the family can be a rewarding experience for kids. In addition to learning responsibility, kids often feel they have a friend in their pet and confide in them. Pets can share love and affection and can teach kids empathy and important life lessons about reproduction, aging, and death.

### **Choosing a Pet**

It's important that you choose a pet that is appropriate for your family. Consider:

- The ages of your children. Kids under four years of age don't have the self control and understanding to interact safely with a pet
- How much time your family can commit to caring for the animal
- If you'll be able to afford the food, toys, shelter, bedding, and vet care the animal will require
- Who will be responsible for caring for the animal
- If you thoroughly understand the specific needs of the animal you choose

Many parents worry about choosing a dog breed that is "good with kids." Although there are some breeds that are in generally better with kids, any dog can bite. Most dog experts agree that the breed of a dog isn't as important as making sure that the animal receives proper socialization, humane training, adequate food and shelter, and enough exercise and attention.

### **Buying a Pet**

Although it may be tempting to buy a kitten after seeing it in a pet shop window, don't do it. Pet stores often buy animals from "puppy mills" or "kitten mills" that engage in irresponsible breeding in inhumane conditions, and pets purchased from a pet store can be harboring illness.

Instead, adopt a pet from your local shelter, or visit [Pet Finder](#), a non-profit website with links to animal welfare organizations across the country with animals seeking homes.

### **Safety**

Kids can hurt pets and pets can hurt kids. That's why it's important to establish safety rules before you even bring the pet home. Here a few general guidelines:

- Never leave children under the age of four alone with a pet
- Rules for appropriate and inappropriate ways of petting or holding the animal
- Don't bother an animal when it is eating or sleeping

- Never allow children to take food or toys away from a dog
- Acceptable games to play with the pet
- Learn appropriate ways to train and discipline the pet. Never hit or kick an animal.
- Respect an animal's sign that it wants to be left alone. Hissing, growling, retreating, lip curling, and flattened ears are all signs that it has had enough.

### **Visit the Veterinarian**

It's important that your vet examines your pet before you introduce it to your family or other animals. The doctor will check the animal's overall health as well as for parasites such as worms or fleas, and recommend vaccinations.

Pet experts recommend that dogs and cats are spayed or neutered before they have a chance to reproduce, so make sure to discuss this with your vet.

### **Introducing the Animal**

Bringing home a new pet can be very exciting, especially to small children, but it's best to allow the animal some time to get used to its surroundings before being handled. Once it has had a day or two to get used to things, introduce it to the family. Take things slowly at first to be sure both the pet and its people feel comfortable with each other.

### **Teaching Empathy and Responsibility**

It's important that kids understand that their pet is a living creature that feels hunger, thirst, cold, heat, fear, excitement, and pain just like they do. Kids that feel empathy for their pets are likely to take better care of them. One of the best ways for kids to learn pet care is by watching their parents model appropriate behavior.

Kids under the age of 10 need assistance caring for their pets. Parents should supervise children as they provide daily care. Most kids 10 and older should be able to care for their animal responsibly, but a parent should still oversee that the animal's needs are being met.

### **For more information:**

- ASPCA Animaland [http://www.aspca.org/site/PageServer?pagename=kids\\_home](http://www.aspca.org/site/PageServer?pagename=kids_home)
- AVMA's Animal Care Activity Section for Children  
<http://www.avma.org/careforanimals/kidscorner/default.asp>
- The Humane Society's "Selecting the Right Pet for Your Family and Making the Introduction"  
[http://www.avma.org/careforanimals/kidscorner/default.asphttp://www.hsus.org/pets/pet\\_care/selecting\\_the\\_right\\_pet\\_for\\_your\\_family\\_and\\_making\\_the\\_introduction.html](http://www.avma.org/careforanimals/kidscorner/default.asphttp://www.hsus.org/pets/pet_care/selecting_the_right_pet_for_your_family_and_making_the_introduction.html)

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