

A Pet for Your Preschooler?

Most children are fascinated with pets. Pets can teach children responsibility and empathy and provide love and companionship. But there are many factors to consider when you are thinking about adding a pet to your family.

Are you willing to take on the added responsibility?

Before you ask whether your child is ready, you should start by asking if YOU are ready for a pet. The ultimate responsibility for a pet is in your hands. A pet is likely to make changes in your life. Some pets are almost as disruptive as having a new baby—waking you at night and damaging things in your home.

When is the right time?

Just because the neighbor's dog had the most adorable puppies does not mean YOU should get one. Carefully consider the decision to get a pet. It's probably not the right time to get a new pet if you have a child in the house who is under the age of two, you are planning to move, or your vacation trip is right around the corner. Put at least a month's thought into the decision.



Is your child ready?

Children as young as three can help care for a pet. Here is what preschoolers are capable of doing, with your supervision:

- playing gently with pet
- giving pet treats
- filling food and water dishes
- brushing fur
- giving love, attention, and respect

Teach your child the safe way to feed your pet. Remove the pet from the area and let your child scoop dry food and pour water. Then bring the pet back to the area. Teach your child to never touch or remove the food. Many animals will protect their food.

Even though a preschool age child can be involved in pet care, children aren't ready to take primary care of a pet until their teen years. Adults need to oversee the job to make sure that the child does what is necessary to properly take care of the animal. Animals should not suffer because children are beginning to learn responsibility.

Here are a few things to teach your child about animals:

- Never touch an animal's food.
- Wash hands after touching an animal.
- Let an adult clean up animal waste.
- Avoid teasing or provoking an animal.
- Pay attention to ways an animal tells you it doesn't like what you are doing. Help your child "listen" to the animal.

What pet is the right choice?

If you and other family members are out all day long, or if you travel frequently, then you'll need to consider how you will take care of the pet during the times you are away. Some pets tolerate being on their own during the day better than others. Also consider how you will care for a pet when you take a trip. Who will take care of it? Can you take it with you?

The following are NOT recommended as pets in families with young children because of the possibility of spreading disease:

- Ferrets
- Turtles, iguanas, lizards, or other reptiles
- Birds of the parrot family
- Wild or dangerous animals

Do any family members have asthma or allergies?

About six percent of the population are allergic to animals and 25 percent of people being treated for allergies are sensitive to cats and dogs. Cats cause many more allergy problems than dogs because they secrete from their skin an allergenic oil, then they lick their fur and shed their allergen-coated hair and skin constantly. Cat hair and dander are very hard to remove from your home once they are present. You might not know if your child is allergic before you get a pet. One way to find out is to visit a friend who has the same kind of pet and see if your child shows any signs of allergies—runny eyes, wheezing, skin rashes. However, allergies can develop over time so there is always the chance that allergies may develop later.

Do you want the added expense?

Pets can be very expensive. In addition to the costs of the animal itself, you may have to pay for cages, bedding, feeding dishes, toys and other supplies. You will have the continuing cost of food. Veterinary care can also be a large expense. Regular checkups are needed for younger animals and older animals may need more care. Before buying a pet, analyze your budget and decide if you can afford it.

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What to do when a pet dies?

Children will be filled with many questions when a pet dies. Answer simply, clearly, honestly. If a pet is sick or dying, prepare a child for the inevitable. If possible, help your child say “good-bye” before a pet dies. Support, guide, and comfort your mourning child. Around age 4 children first understand that death is universal and not reversible. The death of a pet can be an opportunity to learn about death.

What if you just can't have a pet?

Even if having a pet is not a good choice, your child can still have a chance to interact with animals. Visit a friend's pet, go to the zoo, volunteer at a local animal shelter.



Pets can add to family life by helping children

- Learn to give and receive unconditional love.
- Care for those weaker and dependent on us.
- Realize that every living thing deserves our respect and care, regardless of whether it is useful, beautiful or clever, or not . . . just for itself.

Sources:

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