

Picking a Family Pet 101

Whether kids are watching fish in a fish tank, handling the classroom hamster, or visiting animals at the zoo, sooner or later an interest in animals becomes a plea from children to have their very own pet. “Please, please, dad, can I get a lizard?” or when protesting that pets are a big responsibility, “Mom, I really can take care of a puppy!”

Pets are a great way for kids to develop empathy and responsibility, but it’s all too easy for families to get in over their heads. So, how do you know when your child *and* the family is ready for the joys and challenges?

Here are some things to consider:

- Start with smaller animals before graduating to puppies and kittens.
- Children under 5 may be especially susceptible to animals that carry disease, such as turtles, hamsters, chicks, or hedgehogs.
- Children should always wash their hands after handling animals or cleaning cages or tanks.



- Monitor interactions with pets to make sure they’re not being teased or loved too much!

- Avoid introducing pets to the household during hectic holiday times when routines are difficult to establish.

Which pet do you choose? Picking the right pet for your family is critical. Some pets are great, and some pets clearly are not! Does the animal like being handled? Can you feed it easily? Does it need a cage? Will it try to escape? How much time do you as a parent need to monitor pet and child interactions? Are you confident that your child can be alone with the animal?

Who takes care of the pet? As a parent, you want your child to share in the responsibility of caring for the pet they choose. Does your child like to nurture and take care of living creatures? Does your little one understand how to feed, exercise, and keep animals

clean? If your child doesn’t understand these concepts, or if they lose interest in things quickly, they probably aren’t ready to help with the care.

Researching the pet together at the library and on the Internet is a great way to involve kids in choosing the right pet. Just because your child loves skunks doesn’t mean that you should own one!

Pet lovers agree that these animals tend to make good pets:

- Rats and guinea pigs, both of which don’t mind being handled and rarely ever bite.
- Small birds—budgies, lovebirds, parakeets
- Fish

Check out: www.petplace.com for more information on which pet may be right for you.

What’s the Cost? Find out what the cost of buying and keeping the animal is. How much is a tank or a cage, and what types of toys or props are needed to keep the animal happy? How much and what does the animal eat? What are common types of illnesses this animal gets, and what are the vet bills anticipated?

Adults’ Responsibility

Recognize that, as the parent, you are ultimately responsible for the health and well-being of the animal you choose. Children’s interests change, but the pet will remain.

PERSONAL PARENTING

Courtesy Counts

Teaching children to be courteous is important to most parents. Begin with simple words and phrases: “Please,” “Thank you,” “Excuse me,” and “You are welcome.” Make sure your child hears the words over and over from you. “Please put your coat away.” “Thank you for helping me make the bed.”



*The nature of childhood has changed:
There's not much nature in it.* www.beoutthere.org

Lip-Smacking Fruits

Most kids like bananas, oranges, apples, cherries, strawberries and other fruits. These foods are naturally sweet and help curb a sweet tooth. Serving apples with a yogurt dip is simple and nutritious. And a strawberry smoothie—delicious!

Try this antioxidant, potassium-packed frozen treat. Cut a firm banana in half horizontally. Insert a Popsicle stick in the end of each. Roll or brush the banana in melted chocolate. Serve fresh or frozen. If freezing, let the chocolate-coated bananas cool, then wrap and freeze them for up to a month.



Beyond a Cow Goes Moo!

Children love to learn about animals. That's why we often teach children the different sounds that animals make. When kids moo like a cow, bark like a dog, and quack like a duck, everyone's happy. As children grow, expand on their curiosity by learning about where animals live, what they eat, and how they sleep. A trip to a zoo or a farm is always an adventure for kids. And it's always better to learn about things through hands-on experiences rather than just looking at pictures.

Animal questions: When asking questions about animals, be sure to throw in some easy questions you think your child will know the answer to. But ask some more difficult ones, too, as your child continues to learn.

- Do you know what a cow eats for lunch?
- Is a giraffe taller than a lion?
- Which animal has black-and-white stripes?
- What does an elephant use its trunk for?

Fold-Away Neighborhood Map

Make a neighborhood map to familiarize your child with places that are close by and places you go to on a regular basis. This activity offers an excellent opportunity to talk about street safety as well as other safety issues.

For this activity, you will need a white or green plastic tablecloth and some felt-tip markers. Help your child draw streets, houses, stores, the post office, church or synagogue, the hospital, and other landmarks in your neighborhood. Older children may have the ability

to take this task on all by themselves, with expertise from you. When you've finished with the neighborhood, just fold it up until it's time for another play session.



Earth-Friendly Kids

Most children love the great outdoors and the animals that live there. They don't need to be convinced about the importance of taking care of the earth, but they do need to be taught and reminded *how* to do it. It's easy to nurture the love of nature and create young environmental stewards by acting as role models. We can talk with our children about the importance of keeping the earth clean and about using resources wisely. The following environmental terms can become part of our everyday vocabulary.

Reduce: Use only what is needed. Kids can turn off the water when brushing their teeth, use less water in their bathtub, and turn out the lights in rooms they aren't using. Grown-ups can purchase products that use less packaging, buy items in bulk, and use cloth grocery bags when shopping.

Reuse: Use things more than once and maybe even in a different way. Before throwing something in the trash, think about how it might be used again for something purposeful. A shoebox can become a mailbox for imaginary play. Make beanbags and puppets from old socks, giant stackable blocks from

milk cartons, sand molds from plastic deli containers, and collages from used straws, bits of wallpaper, old photos, bottle caps, and Popsicle sticks. You can even make dirt by composting everything from eggshells and coffee grounds to newspapers and yard clippings.

Recycle: Utilize a curbside recycling program or local recycling center to turn some kinds of trash into other materials that can be used again. Another way to support recycling efforts is to buy things made from recycled materials. Paper, plastic, and even toys are often created from recycled materials.

Upcycle: This is a new term that refers to the process of converting what might otherwise be waste into something with even higher quality or better environmental value. A good

example of this is making wooden blocks from leftover pieces of wood.

Families can also make a valuable difference by being involved in earth friendly activities together. Here are a few ideas:

• **Tree Planting**

Contact the National Arbor Day Foundation and get information about trees that grow well in your area. They give away free seeds and seedlings! Find a good spot for planting, then prepare a hole and the roots of the new tree, cover the area with 2 inches of mulch, and water often until the tree

is established. This is an ongoing activity because children can watch the tree grow.

• **Neighborhood clean-up projects**

Think of a place that's important to you and decide when to clean that area. Bring trash bags, gloves, and a sense of humor, and get busy!

• **Adoption projects**

Have kids research endangered animals or at-risk ecosystems. Host a bake sale or car wash to raise money for the cause, and then donate the proceeds to a specific environmental effort.

Resources:

- *I Can Save the Earth* by Alison Inches and Viviana Garofoli
- Websites: www.nrdc.org/reference/kids.asp (lists multiple Web sites for kids to get involved with environmental efforts.)
- *How to Be an Everyday Philanthropist*, by Nicole Bouchard Boles, is packed with the addresses of companies that renew, reuse, and recycle everything from cell phones to eyeglasses and wine bottle corks.
- Terracycle is a company with a great motto: "Outsmart Waste." When you go to its Web site, www.terracycle.net, you'll find all kinds of products—from backpacks to desk clocks and coasters—all made from recycled stuff. Terracycle keeps tons of rubbish out of landfills by recycling things like yogurt containers, candy wrappers, vinyl records, and circuit boards into cool, functional items.

