

The Daily Parent

A NEWSLETTER FOR WORKING PARENTS

A FURRY, FEATHERY OR SCALY BEST FRIEND: Children and Pets

Has your family ever had a pet? Has your toddler made friends with the neighbor's new puppy? Are you in charge of feeding the child care center's guinea pig over winter break this year?



Animals can be more than just fun friends for children. Research shows that having pets can benefit children of all ages. Pets can help grow children socially and emotional, as well as help their intellectual and physical development.

Developmental Benefits of Pets for Children

Children of all ages can make friends with an animal—whether it's their own pet or a friend's. These friendships help social and emotional development. But, each age group benefits differently from animals.

Infants/Toddlers:

Cognitive Development: Babies enjoy the sensory aspects of animals. They see the

pretty bird, hear the cat's meow, and pet the soft dog. Toddlers can also learn the names and shapes of different animals, and the noises each one makes.

Social/Emotional Development:

Toddlers start to form emotional bonds with pets, and make "friends".

Physical Development: Older toddlers can get exercise and physical activity by walking or playing with a pet, depending on the type of animal. Cats and dogs are more active than smaller animals. Smaller animals may help older children develop fine motor skills.

Preschoolers:

Social/Emotional Development: As children get a little older, they learn more from their pets. Their relationship with the animal may grow. They will learn about caring for their pets. Caring for a pet can promote feelings of empathy. And, preschoolers will see how animals react if they are treated nicely.

Older Children:

Social/Emotional Development: Helping take care of pets gives older children feelings of responsibility. Your daughter can give the cat a spoonful of dry food in the morning, or feed the fish in class every day.



In This Issue

Being Safe	2
Pets to Avoid	2
Take Caution with These Pets.....	3
Is a Pet for You?	3
For More Information	4



Pets can boost self-esteem by giving children an experience of unconditional love. No matter what's going on at school, or with their friends, pets treat children the same way.

Finally, older children can learn about the life cycle from pets. Whether a pet has babies, or dies, your child can learn important lessons about life.

However, some types of pets are safer for children than others. And, there are important rules for how children and pets should get along.

Being Safe

With children and pets, the first rule is: **supervise your children when they're playing with animals.** Use your best judgment. In most cases, it's easy to tell when an animal might be upset with your child's behavior, or if an animal is about to react to something. For instance, children should stay away from animals that are hurt.



Some other rules include:

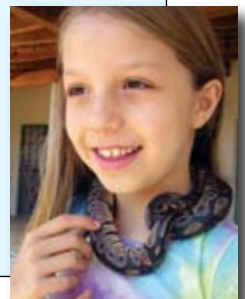
- ▶ Children (and adults) should not bother pets while they are eating or sleeping. Startled animals may react harshly.
- ▶ "Stranger" animals are not necessarily nice. If you or your child meets a new animal, ask the pet's owner if the animal is friendly and okay to touch.
- ▶ Parents should serve as a role model for proper pet care. If you treat your pet well, your children will act the same way.
- ▶ Teach your children how to handle animals. For instance, small animals should be treated gently. Cats and dogs generally don't like to have their ears pulled. Small children sometimes have a hard time being "gentle". Guide your young one to handle and touch animals gently. Also, depending on the age, your child may not be ready to handle an animal.
- ▶ Always wash your hands after touching an animal. Sometimes, animals' fur or skin may contain bacteria that is harmful to humans. By washing your hands after playing with an animal, you and your child will stay healthy.
- ▶ Note the pet's body language and tell your child what it is saying. For instance, if a cat is hissing and has puffed out its fur, it is angry and should not be touched.
- ▶ Avoid over-stimulating the pet. As a general rule, don't startle a pet by yelling or sneaking up on it. Some animals may need quiet time or a quiet space away from children.



Pets to Avoid

Animal ▶ Lizards (such as iguanas), Turtles and other Reptiles (such as snakes)

Why it's Unsafe ▶ Nine out of 10 of these animals typically carry the bacteria for salmonella, a disease that can be life-threatening for young children and infants.





Animal > Amphibians (frogs, toads, newts, and salamanders)

Why it's Unsafe > Children under 5 should avoid these animals due to risk of contamination from bacteria.

Animal > Hedgehogs, prairie dogs, ferrets, chinchillas, and monkeys

Why it's Unsafe > Although available in some pet stores, these animals are still wild, and may not be appropriate for children.

Animal > Baby chicks and ducklings

Why it's Unsafe > Risk of salmonella- a type of bacteria.

Animal > Any animal with a "bad vibe"

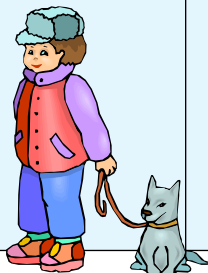
Why it's Unsafe > If an animal doesn't seem friendly or seems overly aggressive, it shouldn't be around your child.

Take Caution with These Pets

Animal > Hamsters, gerbils, and other small rodents

Why Take Caution? > Although they are fine pets for older children, these small animals may be too small and fragile for infants and toddlers to play with.

Animal > Puppies and kittens



Why Take Caution? > Baby animals may be feisty and have harsh reactions to handling by a preschooler, such as biting or scratching. An older, calmer animal may be more suitable for your home.

Animal > Rabbits

Why Take Caution? > Rabbits can be great pets, but they can be frightened by energetic children. Sometimes they don't like being picked up and carried around.

Is a Pet for You?

If you're thinking about getting a pet for your family, consider a few things:

- ▶ Is your home big enough for a pet? If you live in an apartment or condominium, are pets allowed?
- ▶ Is there room in your family budget for food, supplies and vet bills?
- ▶ Is your child ready for a pet? Do you have time to supervise your child's interaction with the pet?
- ▶ What kind of pet is right for you? Do you have the energy and time to care for a cat or dog, or would a less active animal, like a fish, be better?
- ▶ Do you or your child have any pet allergies? If you don't know, consult your doctor.
- ▶ Are you ready to make a commitment to a pet with a life-span that can last years? Are you ready for a pet that will only live a short time (that can be hard for young children to accept)?



If your family decides to adopt a pet, the responsibility for the well-being of the animal ultimately falls with you. Although your child can help, it's up to you to make sure the animal is safe, healthy and taken care of properly. A pet can be a wonderful addition to your family.

For More Information:

Sesame Street Workshop features research-based articles and tips on children's development and animals, as well as information on unsafe pets. www.sesameworkshop.org.

The Humane Society of the United States has information about families and pets, including resources for choosing and introducing new animals to your family. They also feature links to local animal shelters and veterinarians. www.hsus.org

The Center for Disease Control's website features a section called "Healthy Pets, Healthy People". This site has information about how to keep young children healthy when they are around animals. www.cdc.gov/healthypets.



The Daily Parent is prepared by NACCRRRA, The National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies, with funding from the Citi Foundation, New York, New York. © 2007 NACCRRRA. All Rights Reserved. #357-1203



Citi Foundation

