



Caring for a Pet

Most children yearn for a pet of their own, yet have a hard time understanding the responsibility that is necessary to assure the animal's health and well-being. Before bringing an animal into your home, it is critical that you educate your children on how to properly care for a pet. If an animal is already in the home, introducing responsibility and caretaking as the child grows should be an ongoing effort. By doing this, you will ensure that your child participates in the care of the animal, which many children shirk, as well as helping him or her understand that animals are feeling creatures who need both care and respect.

Being respectful toward an animal is not just important for the animal, but for the welfare of the child. No matter what a child's age is, it is important to monitor him or her around animals. This is not only crucial for infants and toddlers, but for older children, too. A preteen who plays roughly with a dog is just as likely to be bitten as a toddler who pulls a dog's tail. You'll also need to make sure that the child is regularly completing any pet care chores he has been assigned.

How do you determine what chores a child can successfully complete? Fresh food and water are an animal's most basic needs. With parental supervision, most children, even at age four or five years old, can handle this responsibility if properly instructed. To help a child succeed in this task, post a detailed reminder and keep bowls, food and water accessible and measured out. Parents or teachers can prominently display a calendar on the refrigerator or bulletin board where children can

check off what has been completed. Making the children's responsibilities part of a larger routine can also help them remember. For example, children can feed their pets when they get ready for their own lunch. Their own meal becomes a reminder that their pets need to eat, too, and helps kids not forget. By helping children succeed early on, you will create lasting good habits.

Handling "bathroom" responsibilities is good for preteens and teens. Some may be resistant to this task, but cleaning the litter box or cage, or taking the dog outside for his "bathroom break," increases the child's sense of responsibility for the animal. It's also a good idea to explain what can happen if an animal cannot eliminate, or if the litter box is not regularly cleaned. Also, you can simply ask the child to put him or herself in the animal's position. Children need to know that pet care is an ongoing responsibility. For example, dogs need to be walked several times a day. Children should realize that this includes rainy days, hot days and times when

they'd probably rather be out playing with their friends. However, providing consistent, loving care for a pet will result in a devoted friend for life.

It's important to praise children for a job done right after they do it. This works for both kids and dogs! If possible, try to make the chore fun. The point is to teach responsibility, not how to endure hardship. Praise and support them generously at first, and then gradually take a step back. Don't forget to check on them occasionally later on, too.

In addition to the responsibilities the child has assumed, make sure he or she does purely fun things with the pet, too. In this way, you're letting your kids enjoy the fruits of their responsibility. They will want to stick with their chores, if they experience and learn to care first-hand why it matters. These experiences also give children a chance to teach the dog, cat or bird good manners and tricks, both of which should be taught using "positive reinforcement," rewarding during good behavior.

Hurting an animal intentionally should never be tolerated—for any reason. You should also make it a rule that your children should never bother animals while they are eating or sleeping. Animals are protective of their food. They may feel threatened that their food will be taken from them. An animal can startle very easily if awoken, and can bite out of fear or confusion. Again, asking children to put himself in the position of the animal will help him understand.

A pet who joins the family when kids are young may live for many years with that family. Some pets, including hamsters, fish and dogs, may have much shorter life spans than people. Children must learn that older animals have special needs, and they must interact with and care for them differently than they do with younger animals. Some older cats, for exam-

ple, need more sleep, and may not have the energy to play that they used to. Dogs can develop arthritis or age-related illnesses, which require plenty of rest and gentle handling. Kids should learn not to rough house with older animals, and to show them the respect they deserve. Some animals with special needs may require daily medication, special diets or

regular bathing. Older children can provide assistance with these chores, and help keep their pet comfortable. Younger children should learn to be respectful and patient around their older and/or special-needs pets, and give them the space they need.

Kids also need to prepare for the possibility that their pet may die. Some animals die of illness or injury. Sometimes we opt to humanely euthanize our pets to alleviate suffering. It is important to discuss this with a child so he or she can understand and grieve the loss. There are several things you can do with a child to help them grieve. It can be help for a child and the family to have a memorial service. You can encourage a child to do something special after a pet dies, like draw a picture or write a letter to him or her. Children may feel better if they keep something that their pet really loved, like a collar or

toy. Sometimes gathering up photographs of a beloved pet and creating a special album is helpful or reading with a child good books about losing a pet.

Having a pet as part of your family can teach wonderful lessons—patience, kindness, responsibility and respect. The love of a best friend and the opportunity to build responsibility cannot be matched by any other experience. Properly educating a child about an animal's needs helps make it a beneficial and rewarding experience for both pet and child.



HELPFUL WEBSITES

Read about dog care, cat care, bird care, rabbit care, fish care, gerbil care, hamster care, guinea pig care, rat care, mice care, spay and neuter and hot and cold weather tips at www.aspca.org, and have your students read and download fun educational pet care information at www.animaland.org.

For books about companion animals and humane themes, visit our children's annotated bibliography, Kids, Animals and Literature at www.aspca.org/bibliography.

For tips, articles, lessons, and activities that you can use with school-aged children visit www.animalessons.org.