

Pets Teach Children Life Lessons

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Have your children asked you for a family dog, cat, hamster, reptile, bird, or fish?

Before you say “No,” think about how they could benefit from helping to care for pets. Dogs have been known to be “man’s best friend,” and their unconditional love for their owners can be advantageous to everyone in the family. And, when you’re feeling lonely or stressed, the soft purr of a cat can bring great comfort.

Besides having hours of fun playing with pets, children learn many important lessons as they take some responsibility for an animal’s wellbeing.

Ways in which children benefit from having pets:

Pets teach responsibility. When children have pets, they’re learning to care for and consider the needs of someone other than themselves. This develops empathy, compassion, and discipline. Young children will need to share this responsibility with others, and not be expected to act beyond their capabilities.

Pets can help children practice social skills. When a toddler goes to pull the tail of his cat or his rat, his parents will teach him to be gentle and respectful. Learning to control impulses is helpful for children as they develop friendships. Many types of pets are responsive to kind and loving attention.

Dogs help us stay healthy. Walking the family dog is a great way for adults and children to exercise daily. With people sitting by the TV or computer for hours each day, anything that encourages walking outdoors is very valuable. Children love to run with dogs and teach them to fetch a ball or Frisbee.

Pets help to teach life and death lessons. If your bird gets sick or your fish dies, your children will have an opportunity to learn about illness and death, and understand how the family deals with sad or difficult situations. Perhaps you will bury your pet in the ground, or take the sick animal to the Veterinary Doctor. A child’s love and sense of loyalty towards their family increase as they observe their parents treat pets with compassion.

Words of caution:

- Supervise young children with pets. They may hurt each other.
- Check with experts about finding “child friendly” pets.
- Consult with your doctor if your children have asthma or allergies.
- Have realistic expectations about how much responsibility to give children for feeding and caring for pets. If you’re yelling at your children to feed the fish, they may not be ready for that task.
- Children learn from watching you, so be sure you want an animal before bringing one home.

Having pets is a way for children to develop compassion, respect, and responsibility, values that can last a lifetime.