

## Is Your Child Ready for a Pet?

Caring for a pet is a wonderful way to help your child learn what it means to be responsible for a dependent creature.

A pet will also help your youngster develop empathy, compassion and respect for other species.

### **10 Practical Tips for Selecting Your Child's First Pet**

1. Wait for your child to express consistent, genuine interest in having a pet. It's usually children over the age of five who begin to show real interest in a dog, cat or other animal. That's a good thing, because children younger than five cannot handle the responsibility of caring for a pet. Toddlers and very young kids are much more likely to injure an animal, or risk being injured themselves by a fearful or startled pet.

2. I don't recommend giving a child a pet as a surprise, or insisting a youngster should have a pet of his own. It's better for everyone involved, including the animal, if your child is eager for the responsibility of a pet and is prepared.

3. Honestly evaluate your child's maturity and responsibility level, no matter how old she is. If she's mature for her age, takes direction well, uses common sense, has a calm nature and shows empathy for animals, she's probably ready for a pet of her own.

4. If, on the other hand, she's forgetful, careless, reckless, extremely self-absorbed, or tends to get herself into scrapes someone else has to get her out of, she might not yet be mature or responsible enough to care for a dependent, defenseless creature.

5. When you discuss acquiring a pet with your youngster, cover the topic of permanency. Help your child understand pets are not like toys that can be tossed aside or given away if he grows bored with them. Make sure he understands the commitment he is making is for the lifetime of the pet.

Also prepare yourself for the possibility your child will grow tired of caring for his pet. In that case, it is you and other family members who must pick up the slack and take over care of the animal.

6. Set pet caretaking expectations ahead of time. I recommend discussing with your child and other family members all house rules for the new pet and who will have responsibility for what. It's a good idea to write everything down and post it in spot where your child can easily refer to it. Feeding and interacting with the pet is the fun part of pet ownership, but there are many dirty, cumbersome and not-so-fun aspects of daily care that kids must be ready to take on, as well.

7. Research types of pets with your child. This will help both of you learn what's involved in caring for a variety of different animals. It will also give both of you an opening to discuss any

concerns you have about whether your child is ready to take on such an important responsibility. Financial considerations, time constraints, and your living situation will also factor into the choice of a pet.

8. Unless you're prepared to share primary caretaking responsibilities for a pet like a dog, cat or exotic bird with your child, I recommend you start small. You can begin with a couple of fish or a turtle if you're really unsure of your child's level of commitment. Or you can start with a 'pocket pet' like a rat or a hamster.

However, don't assume because a pet is small or lives in a cage it doesn't require much care. All animals require attention in order to be healthy and balanced. Both pocket pets and pet birds require lots of interaction and plenty of time outside their habitats. That's why research and preparation are priceless when it comes to a decision about what type of pet is best for your child.

9. Depending on the type of pet you and your child choose, I encourage you to look first at the shelters and rescue organizations in your area for an adoptable animal. Almost every type of animal now has specialty rescue associations (from turtles to guinea pigs), so consider looking into providing a forever home to an unwanted pet first. Adopting a shelter pet will help your child understand the plight of homeless animals, as well as how terrific it feels to provide a forever home for a deserving pet.

10. If your child loses interest in a new pet, be prepared to set the right example by not giving up the animal. Your child should learn responsibilities don't just disappear when she grows tired of them. Each member of your family must be willing to take care of any pet you adopt for its lifetime.

*Dr. Karen Becker is a proactive and integrative wellness veterinarian. You can visit her site at: [MercolaHealthyPets.com](http://MercolaHealthyPets.com)*

*Her goal is to help you create wellness in order to prevent illness in the lives of your pets. This proactive approach seeks to save you and your pet from unnecessary stress and suffering by identifying and removing health obstacles even before disease occurs. Unfortunately, most veterinarians in the United States are trained to be reactive. They wait for symptoms to occur, and often treat those symptoms without addressing the root cause.*

*By reading Dr. Becker's information, you'll learn how to make impactful, consistent lifestyle choices to improve your pet's quality of life.*