

Choosing the Best Pet for your Family

Your child is begging for a pet. Here is how to decide which critter would be a good fit for your family.

Adopting a living creature must never be a spontaneous decision. Here are some factors to weigh before you bring home a new member of the family.



Consider your child's personality. Children develop empathy and the physical ability to be gentle at different ages. You should give your child an animal he can be successful with *now*. An impulsive child does best with a larger, calm, sturdy companion, such as a Labrador retriever. A sensitive, gentle child could do well with a smaller or more delicate friend, such as a parakeet.

Research your potential pet. You may know your cats from your dogs, but if you are trying to decide between other species, conduct a Web search to learn what each requires in terms of space, diet, temperature, and care. If you know that hamsters are nocturnal, you won't be surprised when the exercise wheel squeaks through the night. It is especially important to provide the right accommodations from the start. For example, if you put a goldfish in a small bowl, it can be a challenge to keep its environment "just right," which may lead to the fish's demise. Instead, use a tank.

Ask yourself: Can I give the animal what it needs? You may find a corn snake appealing, but are you ready to supply it with the mice it needs to survive?

Make sure everyone is ready to adopt. This can be a "deal breaker." As a parent, YOU must be fully prepared to take responsibility for the animal. No matter what lessons you hope your child will learn from this experience, the animal doesn't exist to teach. Any living creature in your home is the adult's responsibility. This is particularly important with young children. Basic care isn't always something little hands can – or even should – do. Certainly, chores should be laid out and assisting encouraged, but do not expect your child to assume full care of the pet. If she needs daily help, reminders and coaching on animal care, she is not irresponsible. She is just a child and perfectly normal.

Think kid-friendly. Fortunately, there are fans of every species, from the adorable lop-eared rabbit to the adorable-only-to-its-mother tarantula. But the pet that plays best with children? One good choice: the guinea pig. They live to be about five to seven years old with proper care, saving you the task of explaining death to a weeping four-year old. They are active during the day and big enough to hold up to a child's handling. They would rather hide than bite, and they whistle happily when they hear you coming. Guinea pigs come in many varieties, including long or short-haired, solid or calico colors.

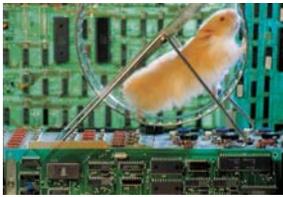
Adopting an animal is a great opportunity to teach children responsibility and how to care for another creature. Pets can be wonderful additions to your family if you choose the pet that is best for your lifestyle.

Which pet is right for you?

BIRDS: Birds are good pets for cat-free homes with kids who prefer watching to touching. Consider a parakeet, canary, finch or cockatiel.

REPTILES: Reptiles require care by kids with good self-control since salmonella is a risk. Hands need a thorough washing after touching the animal or its cage – and absolutely no kissing! Popular pets include corn snakes, bearded dragons, geckos and ball pythons.

FISH: The biggest challenges for fish owners include keeping the tank tidy and not overfeeding them. Freshwater tanks are easiest. Consider a goldfish.



RODENTS: Of the rodents, hamsters are the most popular, followed by guinea pigs, mice/rats and gerbils. Keep in mind that hamsters may defend with their teeth if scared. Also remember: Little hands can hurt little creatures.

How to Help Kids with Pet Care

Encourage their involvement at all stages of adoption. Teach your children to work for what they want in life by involving them in the research process, preparing for the pet's arrival and daily care.

Pay attention to the animal: This is key for everyone's happiness. Rather than keeping the pet in a cage in the child's room, put it in a common area, where they can be supervised. Exactly where you place the cage depends on the pet's particular needs. For example, birds can be endangered by aerosol sprays, cooking odors and drafts. Many children naturally want to pick up and play with their companions, but this requires adult oversight for the safety of both parties.

Embrace the animal for its lifetime. For a rat, a lifetime may only last two or three years, while a young cockatiel may live to meet your grandchildren.

Finally, always remember to supervise your child with his/her pet.

Source: Sarah Wilson and Brian Kilcommons are renowned pet trainers and the authors of best-selling books on animal care – article on Parade section of SB Press Enterprise newspaper on May 7, 2006 (p.28-29).