

Teaching Responsibility through Owning a Pet

Each year we read reports urging us to consider very carefully when we are tempted to buy gorgeous puppies and kittens for our children at Christmas. Yet we know that owning pets can be a great benefit to children and to families. Some of our best family tales told around the dinner table revolve around the antics of much loved family pets. And indeed they are part of the family. They love us unconditionally and have been proven to be good for our mental and physical well-being. Caring for pets can boost self-esteem, prevent loneliness and encourage and facilitate exercise. For children in particular a family pet has many benefits. They can be the safe recipient of secrets and private thoughts. Children often talk to their pets like they do to their soft toys. A good relationship with a family pet can help in developing non-verbal communication, compassion, love, loyalty, affection, stimulation and empathy. Caring for a pet can teach a child responsibility, a connection to nature and a respect for other living things. Pets also provide our children with important lessons about life including, accidents, death and bereavement.

However before taking the plunge, it is important to consider which pet suits your family circumstances and lifestyle, and your children can help care for. Pet ownership is for the life of the pet and usually a long term commitment and expense which must be discussed with all family members. All kinds of pets can bring pleasure, but they are not a toy. They are a dependent family member who has physical, behavioural and emotional needs. And even though children may technically be the owner of the pet only adults can be truly responsible for a pet.

Do your homework around breeds of cats and dogs; some are definitely not appropriate, or even safe around young children. Some bring with them natural risks of infection and disease which must be considered when they are likely to be handled by children who like to get up close and personal.

If owning a pet is out of the question for your family, remember the benefits of being around and appreciating animals can be enjoyed nature walking and visiting zoos and farms. If a new puppy is likely to be on the Christmas list, consider putting a parcel containing pet supplies under the Christmas tree and then selecting the pet as a family when everyone has had a chance to be involved in the discussion.

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