

## Fifteen Reasons Children Should Own a Pet

Animals offer much to a family. Pets are loyal and accept us as we are. They provide parents with teaching opportunities and children with playmates. They invite social interaction and are a stimulus for learning and creativity. Together pets and children form a secret world where a child can share thoughts and feelings they know will never be betrayed. They offer unconditional love and a good listening ear. In our hurried and harried world, animals retain a natural pace. And most importantly, they make us laugh.

- 1) **Companionship:** Pets don't discriminate and they don't judge. At Purdue University Center for the Human-Animals Bond, Dr. Alan Beck found that nearly seventy percent of children confide in their pets. The children said that they knew their pets would not betray them or their secrets. In general, children gave animals high scores for listening, reassurance, appreciation, and companionship.
- 2) **Responsibility:** Caring for the needs of an animal allows a child to make available something the animal cannot attain on its own. Children provide the pet with food, water, and clean housing and in the process, discover that they are needed and relied upon in a way they most likely have not experienced before. Responsibility is a natural outcome of the realization that, in this world, each person is necessary and uniquely important. Assuming responsibility, at its deepest level means children learn to be responsible for themselves, for their actions and hopefully for the global community.
- 3) **Non-verbal communication:** Brenda Bryant, a University of California-Davis Applied Behavioral Science Professor, explains that experiences with pets increase competence in

children in ways that other learned tasks cannot. In addition to increased verbal skills, children naturally become more attuned to nonverbal communication as a result of interactions with their pet. This comes from their practice at “reading” their pet’s body language. But this skill is not restricted to their pet. These children also demonstrated the ability to draw the correct conclusions about emotions from human faces more accurately than those from homes without a pet.

- 4) **Bridge to parent-child communication:** Pets can enrich the relationship between parent and child. They can offer parents teachable moments; they can be a conduit both for our children’s and for our emotions. Communication that might be stilted and difficult can flow smoothly over the shared task of grooming a pet or cleaning a cage. A pet can serve as a safe outlet for family members to share emotions and feelings that might not otherwise be discussed. Their calming presence and their delightful antics help bridge the gap between two very different worlds, childhood and adulthood.
- 5) **The value of life:** Our preparation for and careful consideration of adding a new family member is the first step in parenting with a pet. This important beginning models responsibility to our child at its most basic level. When we control the buying impulse, we teach our children to stop and think before they act. It is important for parents to remember the difference between the purchases of inanimate objects, such as toys, and the commitment to another living creature. A pet should not be seen as disposable.
- 6) **Empathy:** Since all animals need time to adjust to their new surroundings, we can explain the need to keep a quiet voice and to move slowly. This becomes a wonderful opportunity for us to explain about considering someone else’s feelings. By asking our

children to consider how frightening this experience must be for their pet, we exemplify empathy and sensitivity. In addition, a relaxed animal is more likely to respond in a positive fashion to the child's overtures. Robert Poresky, Associate Professor of Family Studies and Human Services at Kansas State University, found that three- and four-year-olds with pets were better able to understand the feelings of other children than those without pets.

- 7) **Commitment:** Parents commonly equate children learning responsibility with the regular feeding and care of the family pet. Although reliability is important, it is not the only lesson to be learned. We are helping our children uphold the commitments they make to us, to their pet, and most important, to themselves. By keeping a promise to do a chore or care for a pet, children make deposits in their personal integrity bank. The wealth of this account directly corresponds to the children's self-esteem and belief in themselves. Each time a child makes a commitment and then keeps it, even if from a parent's insistence, he or she grows this self-esteem account and learns about personal integrity, commitment, and responsibility.
  
- 8) **Patience and Tolerance:** Children, who learn to care for an animal with kindness and patience, learn invaluable lessons in how to treat people as well. Pets don't always do what a child wants. Although this creates frustration for the child, it opens an opportunity for parents to teach tolerance, respect, and patience.
  
- 9) **Self-esteem:** Simple caring tasks like cleaning a cage or water dish can help a child feel that they have achieved something. A job well done, especially if it is a bit of a challenge helps to build self-worth. Successfully training a pet will help a child to gain self-confidence. It also teaches patience, self-control, and delayed gratification.

**10) Learning behavior and biology:** Animals “talk” with one another using body language, facial expressions, hormones and pheromones and vocalizations. Every animal has a sophisticated communication system that conveys important messages to each other and to other species. For children it can be fun to pretend they are anthropologists exploring a new territory in some far away land. They may have heard about the strange and wonderful beings that don’t look or act like people and they have a complex system of communication. The child can be challenged with trying to crack the communication code.

**11) Record keeping and budgets:** Keeping a training journal not only helps plan the pet’s training program but will also provide a wonderful reminder of how far the child and his or her pet have come together. It is very encouraging to read from the journal on days when training has been difficult and the child may feel as though the pet is not progressing.

Another good exercise can teach your child the beginnings of budgets and money handling skills. This, too, can be a part of the pet journal that you and your child are keeping. An expense chart can log everything that is spent on your pet. Children can learn about budgets by a monthly allowance set aside for pet care. Record-keeping is a beneficial exercise on many levels. It supports organizational skills, encourages attention to details, and requires consistency, all of which are important in everyday adult life.

**12) Life Cycles:** Pets afford the opportunity for parents to teach about sex, birth, grieving and death. Birth can be introduced as part of the total lifecycle, the process of renewal, like spring growth in trees and flowers. Witnessing animals breed, using books to follow the development of the fetus, and then participating in the miraculous event of the animal giving birth can be growing experiences for both the parent and the child. The emotions of sorrow and of fear that arise from the death of a pet can put us in touch with our own mortality.

13) **Unconditional Love:** The nonjudgmental companionship pets provide can restore balance in the whole family. Pets offer a different type of compassion from humans. A 1993 Harvard Health Letter stated that companion animals offer unconditional affection and display more consistent behavior than human companions. A family pet can become a parent's partner, helping to give our children a love as constant as the rising and setting of the sun and moon. Knowing they are loved will keep them strong and form a force field to repel the stabs at their self-esteem.

14) **Reduce Stress and Act as an Antidepressant:** Animals have a profound effect on human physiology. They slow the heart rate, lower blood pressure, and temper emotions. During physical activity, the body stimulates the release of hormones that combat depression. Walking with a dog will take advantage of the pet's natural calming effect in addition to the benefits of walking. One study found that a few minutes of cuddling a pet relieved more stress than talking with a parent or a friend. In addition, if a child is carrying out an unpleasant task such as a dreaded homework assignment, a pet's presence was more effective in making the task palatable than having a human companion.

15) **Pets give parents permission to be intuitive.** There are myriad teaching and parenting tools to guide us, but ultimately what we, as parents, choose, is a matter of intuition. Sometimes we find it difficult to trust these "gut feelings," especially when we are trying to do the right thing regarding our children. We would rather rely on the words from experts to lead the way through this confusing maze. Pets are in tune with their instincts and can therefore be teachers to parents as well. Observing pets as they interact with our children can teach us powerful lessons. We can enlist their help when teaching a child to be compassionate. We can teach patience to our children by modeling how to control our anger and frustration. Pets immediately convey their needs and feelings. This basic communication teaches children in a way that is easy to understand. Children learn to be responsible for their behavior.

