

Choosing a Family Pet

Will that cute puppy, kitten, or rabbit in the pet shop window make a good playmate for your child? Pets can add joy to a child's life, help develop feelings of empathy, and teach responsibility. But not all pets are appropriate for small children.

Before you welcome a pet into your home, consider a few important questions:

Do you really want a pet? Pets, especially dogs, take a lot of work. While your child may pitch in to help, you should be prepared to shoulder the lion's share of the responsibility.

How old is your child? It may be safest to wait until your child is past the toddler stage to add a pet to your family. If you want to raise a puppy, wait until your child is 4 or 5 years old and understands how to be gentle.

Once you decide that a pet will be a good addition to your family, how do you choose the right one? Instead of relying on a salesman in a pet shop, ask a veterinarian, who can steer you to kid-friendly pets and also warn you about potential health risks.

Also consider a pet from an animal shelter. An older dog or cat that already has been trained will be less work than a kitten or puppy. You may be able to avoid housebreaking and the problems that go along with it.

One word of caution: if you have children under 5 years old, stay away from reptiles, such as turtles and iguanas. These animals pose a risk of salmonella infection, which can be dangerous in small children.