

Children and the whole family can get lots of fun and enjoyment from having a pet. They can be special friends and playmates for children, and help them feel better if they are low.

While they are a great joy, pets also take some work and commitment.

It's important to think about your family and the kind of pet that will suit you all best. Consider the care your pet will need and whether you and your family will be able to look after it. Helping to look after a pet can help children learn to be responsible and caring.

Benefits for children and families

Growing up with a pet can be great for children and families.

- They can be a friend when your child feels alone and help raise their self esteem.
- Pets can give joy and relieve stress for the whole family.
- Children with pets are often more physically active as they play with their pet or walk their dog.

It's important to choose the right pet for your family and to teach your child how to help look after their pet, It's also important to ensure your children and pets are kept safe and healthy.

No matter the size of your dog or child, there is always the risk of a dog bite or dog attack. Children are most often bitten by their family dog or a dog owned by someone they know. This usually happens in or around the home. Children visiting your home may also be at risk. To reduce the risk, always actively supervise children near dogs. Active supervision means always listening and watching your child and pet together. You should be within arms reach and be able to respond quickly.

Choosing a pet

When choosing a pet for your family there are lots of things to think about, such as the type and size of pet, how much they will cost to look after, the size of your house and yard, the amount of time you can spend with the pet and how active your family is. Some other things to think about are:

- Do you want a big or little pet, or an inside or outside pet? If you prefer a dog or a cat, seek advice on choosing a breed that suits your family. Remember that cute little puppies can grow into big dogs and be aware that some dogs are safer and better suited to children than others.
- Will you be able to look after the pet (for example, feeding, cleaning cages, picking up poo, exercising)?
- Can you afford to look after the pet—food, vaccinations, beds and cages, dog training, fences or gates around the house and vet care—throughout their lifetime? Some pets can live for over 15 years.
- What is the law about the pet you want to have? Some pets need to be registered. Check with your local council about any laws.
- If you go away, do you have family or friends who will care for your pet? If not, will your pet need to go into boarding and how much will this cost?
- If you are thinking of a dog, do you have enough space for one and what exercise will they need? All dogs need regular exercise.
- Will your dog be lonely and 'play up' if you are away from home a lot? Some dog breeds need lots of attention.
- Are you fussy about your garden? Will you find it hard to keep it looking the way you want with an outside dog?
- If someone in your family has asthma or allergies, be aware of what might be triggers for them. Dog and cat hair are common triggers for allergies and asthma. If you are concerned about asthma, choose a pet which doesn't have fur, such as lizards and fish, or keep pets which may trigger asthma outside the house. You can get advice from your doctor, vet or asthma association.



ACT
Government

Community Services

THIS GUIDE AND OTHERS ARE AVAILABLE ONLINE

Children's safety

To keep your children and pets safe:

- **An adult should always be present** when young children and pets are together—especially with dogs.
- **No matter the size of your dog or child, there is always the risk of a dog bite or dog attack.** Children are most often bitten by their family dog or a dog owned by someone they know. This usually happens in or around the home. Children visiting your home may also be at risk. To reduce the risk, always actively supervise children near dogs. Active supervision means always listening and watching your child and pet together. You should be within arms reach and be able to respond quickly. Have a back up plan in case the phone rings or there is a knock on the door.
- **If you are unable to watch your child and pet, make sure they are separated.** If you are separating a dog from a child, it may be useful for the dog to have toys or treats to keep them happy.
- **Never leave children and dogs alone together in a car.**
- **Keep cats and dogs away from your baby,** especially when baby is sleeping or not able to move around. Cats like to find warm places to sleep, like a baby's cot or pram, but this is very unsafe for your child. Using a barrier on a nursery door and keeping your baby's pram away from your cat can help. Use a barrier or train your dog to stay out of your baby's nursery.
- **A baby or young child's sudden movements can surprise a cat or dog** and it may try to defend itself by biting or scratching. Keep in mind that a young child's face may be at the same height as a cat or dog, so they can easily have their face or eyes scratched or bitten. Children are also at risk of bites and scratches from other pets such as rabbits, guinea pigs, and birds. It is important to create a child-free escape area for your pet.
- **Training your dog is one of the best things that you can do for your dog and your family.** Teach your dog to be well behaved around people they know, strangers, children or other pets. The RSPCA advises all dogs be taught to obey commands such as 'come', 'sit' and 'stay'.
- **Keep litter trays, and food and water bowls away from your child.** Young children can drown in as little as 5cm of water.
- **When travelling with your pet, plan where your pet will be in relation to your child.** Use harnesses, or pet carriers, and keep them away from your child.
- **Never tie your dog's leash to a pram or stroller** when walking with your child and dog.
- **Children can drown in fishponds so put firm wire mesh on or around the pond to keep them safe.** If this is not possible, make sure you actively supervise your young child at all times when they are near a fishpond.

Teach children how to act around pets

Problems with pets often occur when children don't know how to act around them. It's important to teach this from an early age.

Help children to take on tasks such as grooming, feeding or keeping the water dish full. Remember, even if children are involved in care, an adult is always ultimately responsible for the pet.

Show and teach your children:

- how to look after, and behave around a pet by showing the right way to do it. The more you learn about your pet's behaviour and habits, the better you can do this
- that a pet should never be hurt or teased—rough play may hurt, upset or over-excite dogs. Never hug a dog around its neck
- never to approach a cat or dog that is sleeping, eating, chewing a bone, or sick
- not to go near a dog without an adult close by and supervising, and never to go near a strange dog
- to always ask an adult if its okay when they want to pat a dog, and always check with the dog's owner
- the warning signs that a dog or cat is feeling upset or uneasy

A dog should be left alone if it:

- lifts its lips
- growls
- backs off
- raises the hair on its back.
- cringes in fear.

A cat should be left alone if:

- it is crouching low
- it is hissing
- its claws are out
- its tail is low and swishing.

Introducing a new baby to your dog or cat

Bringing a new baby into the home may mean some big changes for your dog or cat. To make sure your children and pets have a happy relationship, there are ways you can prepare your pet:

- Slowly make any changes to your dog or cat's routine before the baby arrives (for example, the amount of time you spend with the pet, where the pet will be fed, and will sleep). New areas need to be inviting, with toys and treats, so your pet does not feel like they are being punished.
- Let your dog or cat get used to your baby's scent before you bring him home. Allow your dog or cat to sniff something that he has been wrapped in, such as a rug or clothing.
- Praise and reward your dog when he is in the same room as the baby so the dog starts to link good things with the baby. Ignoring your dog, even if you don't realise you are doing so, can create bad feelings between your dog and baby.
- A new baby in the home can be scary for a pet. Once your child starts to crawl, you may need to protect your pet—from squeezing, poking and thrown objects.
- Try to get your pet used to baby noises by playing recorded sounds before she arrives. These can be downloaded from the internet.
- Everyone who will look after your baby should prepare their pets too and understand the importance of active supervision or separation.

Health of children and pets

There are a range of diseases which pets can pass on to humans. Good pet owners look after their pet's health and this goes a long way to preventing your child from getting sick.

There are a number of things you can do to help make sure both your child and pet stay healthy:

- Teach children to always wash their hands after handling any pets and before eating and drinking.
- Use hot water and detergent to clean any litter trays or cages. Wash all pet bedding in hot water and vacuum the house well if pets are kept inside.
- Cats may use sandpits as a toilet so they should always be covered when not in use. Make sure they are kept as clean as possible.
- You will need to maintain your pet's health:
 - Some pets will need you to groom them often which can include coat, ear cleaning and claw trimming.
 - Keep your dog or cat up to date with any vaccinations.
 - Make sure your dog or cat is treated for fleas and worms.
- If your child is bitten or scratched:
 - always wash the area well with soap and water or antiseptic
 - see a doctor if the wound is large, becomes very red or swollen or there is pus
 - check that his tetanus immunisations are up to date.
- Pregnant women should avoid any contact with cat poo as it can be a source of an infection called Toxoplasmosis. This is usually very mild, but may harm an unborn baby. If you are pregnant and must clean a cat litter tray, always wear plastic gloves—also wear them when gardening in case there is cat poo in the soil.

Reminders

- Pets can be very important in children's lives.
- Pets can build children's self esteem, be good company and provide a chance to learn skills.
- Choose the right pet, and keep children and pets safe and healthy.
- Make sure you know how to act with pets as you are an important role model.
- If you can't actively supervise pets and children, then separate them.

Seeking advice

- For information on choosing a pet, suitable dog or cat breeds, and other issues contact a vet, animal breeder, or animal association. Vets can also help with the care and health of your pet including vaccinations, flea treatments and grooming.

Contacts

Child and Family Centres (parenting information and support)	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Gungahlin	6207 0120
	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Tuggeranong	6207 8228
	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: West Belconnen	6205 2904
Kids Help Line	24-hour	1800 55 1800
Kidsafe ACT	9am–3pm Monday–Friday, except public hols	6290 2244
RSPCA	9am–5pm Monday–Friday	6287 8100

Websites

www.cyh.com	Parenting and child health information
www.kidsafe.com.au	Information on child accident prevention
www.parentlink.act.gov.au	Other parenting guides, including Self-esteem, Optimism, Families that work well
www.petnet.com.au	For information on dog and cat breeds and general pet care
www.raisingchildren.net.au	Raising Children Network—covering topics for parenting newborns to teens
www.rspca-act.org.au	RSPCA ACT
www.wearefamilysa.com.au	For information on children and pets

This guide's content has been produced by Parenting SA and adapted by the ACT Government to reflect the application to laws of the Australian Capital Territory.

© Department of Health,
Government of South Australia.
Revised 09/10

Published by ParentLink
Community Services Directorate
GPO Box 158
Canberra ACT 2601

T 13 34 27
F 6205 0968
E parentlink@act.gov.au