



by Karen Stephens

# Teach Kids Caring and Safe Ways With Pets

Furry, feathered, or finned friends offer kids much more than companionship. They help children develop lifetime character traits like responsibility, compassion, empathy, accountability, resourcefulness, and the ability to love unconditionally.

If you adopt a pet into your family, it's important to teach children to care for the pet responsibly. Children should learn what their pet needs for health and happiness. They should learn how to safely provide care and affection.

When introducing a pet, teach children basic *pet etiquette* so pet memories are happy ones. Pets, even domesticated ones, operate on survival instincts. So it's important that children learn the natural ways animals behave, based on their own species' defenses. Teach children how their pet acts when it's hungry, tired, or frightened, then guide children in responding to their pet's needs and moods appropriately.

From the minute a pet enters your home, set up the ground rules for acceptable ways of treating the pet. And always practice what you preach. The way you treat the pet will speak much louder to children than any words you say.

Introduce pet etiquette gradually. In the *getting acquainted* stage, be prepared to remind children often of proper behavior; it's easy for kids to get over-enthusiastic without realizing it. Help kids notice when pets become overwhelmed or frightened when hugged too tightly or played with too rambunctiously. School-agers may like to create a poster listing the pet-friendly tips that they and their friends should follow.

The first few months of teaching kids to be safe and kind around pets will be time consuming. But they'll help your child establish a special friendship that will stay in his or her heart forever.

## **Pet Etiquette for Kids**

- Children should NEVER hit a pet with a hand or object, or otherwise physically hurt their pet.
- Pets should never be teased and taunted with food or toys.
- Pets should not be bothered or silently approached when they're eating, chewing on a toy, sleeping, or seriously hurt or ill.
- When approaching a pet, softly call out to avoid startling the pet.
- Slowly extend a hand "for smelling" when greeting a pet. Most animals use scent to identify friendly humans. (Safety note: Teach children never to approach another person's pet before asking if the pet is friendly!)
- Pet body language should be respected at all times. For instance, dogs show ease and comfort by wagging their tail. They show fear, anxiety, or aggression by growling, laying back their ears, and/or putting their tail between their legs. That behavior is a warning to stay away. Teach children to respect and obey such signals.
- In the case of cats, purring, rubbing against children's legs, and stretching out for petting are good signs. Cats hissing, screeching, ears flat, back arched, and/or tail flicking are signals that scream: "Back off!" Cats often run off when frightened, so don't allow children to chase them under a table or bed, or force cats into a corner.
- In the beginning, children will have a hard time deciphering a pet's behavior. They'll mistake a pet's rambunctious romp as a cue for play, when it's actually a pet's attempt at

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- Pets should be gently stroked or patted on the back or sides. Don't pet near an animal's eyes, mouth, or inside their ears. Many cats prefer not to have their stomach petted or the pads of their paws tickled. No animal's tail or legs should be pulled.
- Pets should be able to refuse play they don't enjoy and walk away. (Thus cats don't have to endure being dressed up like dolls.)
- Pets deserve safe, clean, and fun toys to keep their minds alert and bodies relaxed.
- Pets should never be left outside without shelter in extreme heat, cold, or storms.
- Teach children illness signs for pets, such as labored breathing, listlessness, etc.
- Children should tell parents about pet illness or injury right away.

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- Children should alert parents if friends or neighbors mistreat their pet.
- Pets need fresh water at all times, indoors and out. Food should be provided in a bowl, not by hand. The best mannered and healthiest animals aren't fed human food and aren't confused by being allowed on top of tables or fed from tables.
- Pets need daily play time and exercise in safe settings.
- Indoor pets need regular *potty breaks*. Indoor cats need litter boxes cleaned daily.
- When being walked in urban settings, pets should wear collar, name tag, and leash.
- Pets need a safe and sanitary place to sleep and nap.
- Dogs need periodic baths. Cats benefit from them, too.
- Pets need, and deserve, an annual veterinarian exam with necessary vaccinations.
- And last, but not least, pets need daily doses of love and affection, just like your kids.

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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