



by Karen Stephens

# Family Pets Help Children Develop Positive Traits, Values

There seems to be a never-ending supply of new kittens and puppies looking for good homes. If you're willing to put in the time and effort that a pet deserves, and teach your child to do the same, a pet can be a grand addition to the household.

But don't jump into accepting a pet without forethought. As a family, decide if you have the time, space, finances, and lifestyle to properly care for a pet. Food, vaccinations, medical treatment, and boarding during vacations doesn't come cheap.

Consider the pros and cons of various pets. Resist impulse selection. Base your selection according to the pet's best interests as well as children's. Even if kittens or puppies come free, (and are admittedly cuter than the dickens,) sometimes a gerbil or fish is a more appropriate choice.

If you adopt a pet into your home, be straightforward with your children that pets aren't just for fun and games. Caring for them daily will require effort and responsibility. Set clear expectations for kids' behavior and responsibilities before you welcome a pet.

Once you've successfully incorporated a pet into the family, you'll be amazed at the character traits kids develop. Following are values and abilities that pets help children develop.

## **Preventing and/or Overcoming Fears**

It's common sense that children with pets fear animals less than those without pets. Familiarizing children with the ways of animals helps them master anxiety of the unknown. Teaching children safe and gentle ways around animals helps break down preconceptions that all animals are mean.

## **Positive Self Esteem and Unconditional Love**

Nothing conveys unconditional, nonjudgmental love to a child like a pet. They're forever loyal and a cuddly source of affection. And pets are there whenever a child needs to unburden their troubles on a friendly shoulder.

## **Respectfulness**

Children learn that pets deserve respectful treatment, just as they do. They'll realize all living things have needs and feelings to be considered. Animals, like humans, get hungry, thirsty, and tired. Sometimes they feel like playing, sometimes they don't. Just like children, they get scared by loud and unexpected noises. Like children, pets have strong likes and dislikes as to how they are touched.

## **Empathy, Compassion, and Loyalty**

Children are usually receivers of care. Having pets puts them in the position of caregiver. They learn to anticipate, recognize, and respond to their pet's needs, such as when pets need to be walked, fed, groomed, or shown affection. At the vet's office, they become sensitive to their pet's fear and anxiety. Being able to soothe those feelings prompts children to develop loving ways. They learn the joys and woes of being needed.

## **Sensitivity to Non-verbal Cues**

Being able to correctly read nonverbal behavior enhances communication in all interpersonal settings, from home to work. Teaching children to stay alert, and respond appropriately to a

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pet's nonverbal behavior develops observation skills. And it teaches them to take into account others' preferences.

### **Responsibility, Competence, and Confidence**

Knowing a pet depends upon them encourages children's accountability. And it helps them develop a conscience. Caring children learn to remember to bring a pet in from outside during bad weather. They'll learn that a pet counts on them to keep the food and water bowl filled. They'll realize that a pet at home alone all day needs some romping time once kids are home from school. And it's hard for kids to sleep at night if they haven't made sure their pet's tummy is full . . . or it should be. As children meet a pet's emotional and physical needs, children themselves grow in confidence, independence, and competence.

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### **Resourcefulness**

Children love to make creative homemade toys for cats and birds. Kids in elementary school will enjoy building a dog house with a parent. Customized pet gifts teach kids to give as well as receive during holidays.

### **Accepting the Cycles of Life**

The declining health or accidental death of a pet is often the first time children face the reality of mortality. Due to children's limited experience (and intellectual development) they think death is temporary or reversible. They believe they can magically *wish* a life restored. The loss of a pet presents the one irrefutable fact of life: it does end, no matter how much we wish it weren't true. Learning they can live through the grieving process, learning that love is not lost if memories are held close; those are benevolent gifts pets give our children.

### **Attachment to Nature**

Pets give children insight into the ways of wild as well as domesticated animals. They learn to admire the intelligence and effort it takes for any animal to survive. Pets open children's curiosity about an endless variety of creatures and their required habitats. That builds a sense of wonder and appreciation for all expressions of life on Earth. And that's a trait that will benefit us all.

**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*.