

# Involving Children in Your Pet's Care:

## When It's OK, When It Isn't, and How to Help Keep Everyone Safe

By Andrea Vardaro Tucker, ELS

Children who become active participants in ensuring their pets' well-being not only learn responsibility but can also develop a deeper bond with their pets, leading to a more harmonious home. Although kids' capacity for pet care varies by age and individual maturity level, as well as by each pet's temperament, children and pets can often benefit from children learning how to help keep pets healthy by attending wellness exams, learning proper safety precautions, and taking on suitable pet-care chores.

### Vet-iquette

Introduce children to the concept of pet wellness by talking to them about how pets' veterinary care is like their own doctor visits. "Discussing how these are similar experiences may increase the child's interest and even encourage empathy," says Dr. Kelly C. Ballantyne, a board-certified veterinary behaviorist and clinical assistant professor at University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine and practitioner at Veterinary Behavior at Illinois. Once children show signs of readiness, they can tag along to an appropriate appointment. Consider the following suggestions.

### When Children Can Come Along

There's no clear-cut age at which every child will be ready to participate in veterinary appointments. Instead, Dr. Nancy R. Gee, professor and Waltham human-animal interaction (HAI) research manager in the department of psychology at SUNY, Fredonia, says, "I see this as an issue of maturity level in terms of the child being able to exercise self-control, readily follow instructions, have a basic understanding of how to behave around other people with pets, and understand how to behave around their own pet when the animal may be stressed or excited."



A trial run in a public dog-friendly location like a grooming salon (please call first) might help parents assess children's readiness, according to Dr. Gee.

Wellness exams are a good opportunity for children to join you, but be prepared. Try to bring another adult who can help entertain or leave with your child if needed, and pack toys, coloring books, regular books, or some other item to help keep children quiet and occupied so you and the veterinary team can focus on the furry patient. Most staff will happily loop children into the conversation whenever possible.

While kids can learn a lot from the examination, they should stay hands off, never trying to restrain pets. They also need to be cautious with sick or injured pets in the waiting room who might react aggressively. Make sure you teach children to always ask pet parents and veterinary staff before interacting with pets.

### When to Keep Kids at Home

When possible, avoid bringing children to an exam with pets who are anxious or aggressive—even for wellness visits.

Consider the child's maturity level as well. Dr. Gee says, "When children act

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impulsively, don't follow instructions well, or don't seem to understand or empathize with the animal's perspective in the situation, they probably aren't ready to accompany the pet."

Likewise, emergency visits aren't appropriate for children. The visits may be long and stressful, so keeping kids occupied is more difficult. Plus, pets who don't feel well might not behave the way they typically do around their human brothers and sisters, possibly resulting in snapping or biting. Most important, parents and veterinary staff will need to devote all their attention to the pet.

### Safety and Training

No child is too young to learn about pet safety, and parents are the best models of proper pet handling. Parents should demonstrate where and how to appropriately touch pets while helping children recognize and stop behaviors that make an animal afraid or uncomfortable.

For cats specifically, board-certified animal behaviorist Dr. Wailani Sung, who owns All Creatures Behavior Counseling in Kirkland, Washington, cautions that children need to know "cats are not small dogs" and may not welcome physically affectionate behaviors the way most dogs do.

"Be careful of prolonged periods of petting, which can overstimulate some cats," Dr. Sung warns.

Parents need to take responsibility for showing kids how to appropriately handle cats. Dr. Sung encourages parents to show children "which areas are appropriate to touch and which areas are sensitive, such as ears, paws, and tails." And save belly rubs for canine companions; cats don't usually like their abdomens to be touched. Children should also avoid teasing, chasing, and scruffing cats (picking them up by the skin on the back of their neck), pulling



their tail or whiskers, and petting or hugging them when they're resting or sleeping.

(Of course, this advice is appropriate for children interacting with dogs as well. See the sidebar below for more tips.)

Staying safe also means knowing when kids shouldn't take care of a pet. Regardless of a child's age, Dr. Ballantyne says, "I wouldn't recommend involving children in any care that the pet doesn't enjoy." Children also shouldn't take part in any food-related chores for a pet who becomes aggressive around food.

### The Perfect (Chore) Fit

Parents must decide on an individual basis at what age to involve children in pet care, keeping in mind that the level of responsibility may differ from child

to child, even in the same family. In general, parents can use these loosely age-based guidelines as a suggestion.

#### Preschool

Preschoolers shouldn't independently complete pet-care chores, but you can consider letting your small child help you:

- Set out water
- Fill food puzzles
- Pick up and put away pets' toys
- Bond with and exercise pets through supervised play
- Give pets treats for desired behavior (adults should do the initial training)

#### Elementary School

Once children are in elementary school, they can probably get more involved in pet care, but supervision is still needed. School-aged children can also help:

- Measure and scoop food
- Clean up after pets (washing hands and following sanitation practices)
- Brush pets who like brushing

### Keeping Interactions Between Pets and Visiting Children Safe and Positive

Chances are your pet comes in contact with neighborhood children and perhaps visiting nieces, nephews, or friends' kids, so all pet parents—even those without human children—need to properly handle child-pet interactions. Here's how you can prepare so your pet doesn't get scared and possibly react aggressively:

- Supervise all interactions.
- Encourage calm greetings and interactions by offering treats and by training kids to do so themselves.
- Teach the right way to touch your pet (don't pull on fur, tails, or ears; don't pick up the pet; don't lie down on or ride the pet; avoid kissing the pet or putting your face near his face; don't bother the pet while he's eating).
- Don't force pets to put up with rough behavior, and don't force anxious children to interact with pets.
- Separate eating, sleeping, and anxious or aggressive pets from children.



- Exercise pets, although adults should always hold leashes

### ***Middle School***

In general, middle schoolers don't need as much supervision, but parents should make sure the child is safe and responsible and that all necessary chores get done. After proper instruction, tweens can add on the following tasks:

- Feed pets independently
- Clean cats' litterboxes and properly dispose of pet waste, while observing sanitation practices including careful hand washing
- Brush and bathe pets who like grooming routines
- Possibly walk dogs alone if they can control them

### ***High School***

Teenagers may still need instruction, occasional supervision, and checks to make sure they complete their chores. In general, though, responsible teens can:

- Bathe pets independently
- Trim nails
- Walk most dogs

Older teens and young adults may be ready to help administer some medications to pets who willingly take that medication. Extensive training and supervision are needed to ensure the teenager follows veterinary and label instructions as well as safety precautions.

### **The Bottom Line**

When children help take care of family pets, they develop a better understanding of the pets, creating a stronger bond. With the right training and safety precautions, your children and pets can help each other live healthier, more fulfilling lives.

*Board-certified editor in the life sciences and HealthyPet magazine copy editor Andrea Vardaro Tucker's 9-year-old West Highland White Terrier and 5-year-old human son have become inseparable since the boy began coming to his dog's wellness visits and took on some responsibility for her care.*