



Children and Pets

Recently we took our dogs Daisy and Otis up to Portsmouth for a Saturday afternoon walk and browse around town. We sat for a while in the center of town teaming with tourists to watch the world go by. Soon a spritely little girl named Brianna stopped with her grandparents to worship the dogs. She liked Daisy our Springer Spaniel best because she was lying down and easy to approach. Brianna gained enough courage to stroke Otis' ears and realize they felt like velvet. Brianna focused her abundant four-year-old energy on the dogs as she asked how old they were and what was my name and were they hungry and updated me on a recent Ninja turtle show she had watched.

The human animal bond is there to some degree in most people. Children seem to be fascinated with animals. In some that bond increases as they grow and they may seek a profession where they can maintain the bond. They may become forest rangers environmental researchers or veterinarians. The challenge is how do we keep children fascinated with the caretaking of their own pets once the novelty has worn off.

When I was growing up I begged for a dog or a cat. My folks begged out saying they were allergic. According to my folks when I was four I was lobbying our landlady to convince them that "I really needed a cat". They were completely unmoved citing allergies and cleanliness as good reasons to avoid pet ownership. My father had a dog when he was ten and remembers the Bull Terrier latching onto his leg for fun and not letting go. I was allowed to have turtles and that was it. I ended up doing quite a bit of pet caretaking for the neighborhood dogs and cats.

So what to do when your offspring put the arm on you for a pet? First assess your comfort level. If you are not sure if you want a pet you can always dip your toe in by fostering a pet for a rescue group and see how your family does welcoming a pet that needs a home into your routine. Encourage the kids to do research on the pet to learn about how the breed behaves, lifespan, space, and diet and exercise requirements. Talk to people who own a cat or dog and see what their challenges are. The whole family will have respect for the pet and integrate the work of the pet's care into the day if everyone understands the work involved.

If your kids want to have an exotic pet the research is even more important. Hamsters only live for 2 years. That's important to know because the whole family loves little Donut (that's what we named ours) and it's really heartbreaking when he gets sick. The husbandry for an exotic pet makes the difference between life and death. Have your kids research the species so they know the environmental temperature, humidity, diet, lighting, environmental enrichment and cage substrate they need. Exotic pets may be small but they require a lot more detailed care to keep healthy.

When our daughter Rebecca was 12 she really wanted a ball python. She had played with the practice groomer, Klaudia's, ball python. Once Klaudia's ball python latched onto Rebecca thinking her hand was a yummy mammal to eat and drew blood but Klaudia helped her run cold water over her arm and the snake to get her to let go. This episode, related to me after I finished with an appointment, did not faze her in the least. She learned not to play with a snake when it's hungry. She researched the breed and saved the money for the snake and the cage. She said she would take complete responsibility for the snake. Being a good planner she asked us if we would take of the snake while she was at college, then she would take her back. We made the trip up to New England Reptile Distributors in Plaistow New Hampshire. She picked out a 6-month-old female and named her Aida. She was very good about feeding her dead pinky mice and cleaning her cage. Of course she needed rides to the pet store to pick up bedding and frozen rats for Aida so we were involved in the care. Now we are in the college phase so we are charged with Aida's care. Once Rebecca's done with college she wants Aida back.

Involve the kids in feeding, watering, cage cleaning, dog walking, changing the litter box, and brushing the pet's teeth and veterinary visits when they are young and incorporate these chores into their routine as they grow. It's best that children know they will have these responsibilities before the pet comes into the house. If you make pet care a part of the family routine the children will be learn how to be a responsible pet owner and have the inner resources that come from shouldering the work of pet ownership along with the joy of pet ownership.

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