

Training Your Child To Be 'Pet Wise'

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A child should be taught to interact appropriately with pets from the moment they begin to move around on their own. Children investigate everything around them, including your pet, pet toys, its food and water bowl and the cat litter box. Young children have no conception of the pain they can inflict by biting, stepping or jumping on, kicking, squeezing, hitting, pinching, twisting or pulling various parts of your pet's body. Children may delight in waking a sleeping pet by screaming in its ear or persistently chasing it, giving it no peace.

With daily adult supervision, children must be taught how to treat pets. They must learn that pets are not toys and are living beings that feel pain. It is not enough to tell them what not to do. Children must be shown which parts of a pet's body can be touched and how to gently pet them. Teach them not to disturb an animal while it is resting or sleeping, eating a meal, or playing with or chewing on a favorite toy. Teach your children not to pursue a pet that runs away from them nor to restrain a pet that is trying to break free. A child must understand its own physical strength and the consequences of its behavior. In some cases, role playing is helpful. A child can pretend to be a dog or cat while an adult mimics the child.

If your child is uncooperative, it may be best to keep pet and child separated until the child demonstrates more self-control. It may be necessary, and indeed humane, to place your pet in another home. Even the most reliable and tolerant animal has a breaking point. Children and pets are not necessarily a good mix and you may be better off to wait until your children are old enough to demonstrate consistent responsible behavior before introducing pets to your home. A child that displays extreme and repeated cruelty toward animals is likely in need of professional counseling. Pet ownership is a privilege not automatically deserved by everyone.

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