

PETS & THE FAMILY

Pets can play an important role in people's lives today, and they are often referred to as 'one of the family'. As well as providing a constant source of enjoyment, friendship & fun, many pets thrive in a family and household environment.

To make sure your pet is successfully and happily integrated into the household, you and your family will need to recognise the responsibility that it entails. The following guidelines illustrate how with planning and consideration the right pet can be chosen, can quickly settle in and can become a firmly established member of the family.

A NEW PET IN THE FAMILY

Deciding to get a pet can be an exciting time for everyone in the family or household. As well as the fun elements, a new pet can bring many educational benefits to children, teaching responsibility, caring and mutual trust.

- Carefully consider the type of pet that will suit your family lifestyle, the space available and budget. For families, choose a pet which will reflect your family's personalities – e.g. If you have noisy children, make sure your pet is not timid.
- When you acquire your pet, make sure you create time for a suitable settling-in period. Perhaps school term time will be less hectic and will give your pet some quiet time to adapt to its new surroundings. Also consider the right age for children to get a pet.
- Make sure your new pet is in good health including up to date vaccinations, worming and de-fleaing. Once at home, get the family to adopt good hygiene methods such as washing hands after handling your pets.
- Show children as soon as possible how to be gentle and kind to their pets. Teach them to never touch the pet when it is sleeping or eating, and that tail, ear and skin pulling is not allowed. Tell children that there are times when a pet will show warning signs, such as a tail between the legs or a growl!
- Help your pet to understand the house rules. Cats or kittens for example, need to be shown what they can and cannot do, such as scratching the furniture, where they should sleep and eat, and how to use their litter tray. Dogs should receive obedience training and be rewarded for good behaviour.
- Make sure young children are supervised when they play with their new pet so that you are able to intervene should child or pet get too excited!

PETS AND NEW ADDITIONS TO THE FAMILY

Many parents-to-be will be concerned about how their pet will react to a new addition to the family. However, pets, like babies, prefer a routine, and as long as you make suitable preparations a few months in advance of the baby's arrival. You should find that your pet remains a happy family member:

- Dogs will need a walking routine which fits in with parenthood such as an early morning walk before work
- So that your pet will not suddenly feel neglected once the baby arrives, gradually reduce the amount of time you spend with your pet and leave it in a separate room so it gets used to being without you. Try to then set aside a certain time daily when you give it your full attention
- Decide on the boundaries you will need to have established before the baby arrives. For example, if your cat sleeps on your bed, gently yet firmly show the pet that this is no longer allowed. Put a few baby toys and nursery equipment out and allow your pet to familiarise itself with the new sights and smells
- Once the baby has arrived, make time for your pet when you can, and ask visitors to show the pet some attention to avoid any feelings of being left out
- By establishing a new routine, your pet will quickly adapt and learn to enjoy the new family member. However, keep an eye out for any signs that your pet may be concerned, such as anxiety, irritability or hostility (see also 'Stressed Pets' leaflet)

A PET FOR A BUSY LIFE AND HOUSEHOLD

Many families contain parents who both work. So, how does a family choose a pet that suits this busy lifestyle?

- Consider your lifestyle carefully before choosing a pet. Cats are an excellent choice for working people; two kittens raised together learn to play or sleep during the day, ready for evening fun with their owners. Or visit an animal rescue home, and you may well find an older animal that is already housetrained.
- Get a pet at a quiet time in your life, such as a holiday break at home, so that you are able to make sure your pet is settled into a routine before you return to work.
- If your children are old enough and responsible enough, try to involve them under your supervision in the caring and feeding of the animals.

PETS AND THE ELDERLY

A pet can be just as important to family members in later life: when the children have left home or you have lost a loved one, a pet can bring companionship as well as a sense of purpose. Again, the right choice of pet is vital. Consider the space available for a pet, and if in a residential home,

whether pets are allowed. Pets such as dogs can encourage regular exercise and bring a feeling of well-being. For the less mobile, budgerigars or cats make excellent pets, as they are less demanding and more independent than dogs.