

Activities with Pets

8 Ways Kids Can Help with Pets



Having pets in the home with children may seem like a recipe for chaos, but it's also a wonderful opportunity to teach responsibility and show the unconditional love pets can bring to our lives. From the basic care that keeps your dog or cat healthy to the enrichment that keeps them happy, there are many ways that kids can help care for their furry family members and learn some special lessons in the process.

Setting Everyone Up for Success

Anytime kids and pets are sharing space, it's important to make sure they've been properly socialized with each other. Always supervise interactions between young children and pets as both species can be unpredictable at times. Depending on the task you are teaching, take the time to safely show your child exactly what they need to do and, just as importantly, what they shouldn't do and why. For example, when brushing the cat or dog, be careful around their eyes because quick or unexpected head movements can result in an eye injury.

Of course, each job should be age appropriate for the child and take into account the size, personality, and any special needs of your pet. For example, playtime with a puppy will be very different than playtime with a senior cat and feeding time for a small Persian may be very different than feeding time for a large Mastiff. If your pet has behavioral issues you are working to address, especially those that might pose a risk to kids (for example, food aggression, leash pulling, or hand biting), then be sure to keep those jobs for yourself until the issues are resolved.

How Kids Can Help Care for Your Dog or Cat

Getting kids involved in the tasks that meet your pet's daily needs is the perfect

opportunity for them to learn responsibility and develop confidence. Here are a few ways that kids can help with caring for the dogs and cats in your family.

- **Feeding.** Kids of just about any age can help with preparing food, filling bowls, and stuffing treat toys and puzzles. These are simple tasks that can even be done safely away from the pet, if needed. For example, if you have a large, hungry dog and a small child, put the dog in another room until the food bowl is filled and in place. Feeding your dog or cat specific amounts of food at a scheduled time is a simple and effective way for a child to participate and to learn the importance of a dedicated pet owner in one of the most important parts of pet care.
- **Water.** All pets need constant access to fresh, clean water. Monitoring and topping off water bowls is another easy job that kids of all ages can take on. As with feeding, consider filling water stations at specific times each day to make it even easier for the kids to remember. If your veterinarian has asked you to keep an eye on your pet's water intake, consider having your child help by measuring and keeping a record.
- **Grooming.** Dogs and cats need regular haircoat brushing, nail trimming, and even tooth brushing. A few times a week, have the kids give your pets a good brushing of their fur to help with shedding and distributing healthy oils through the coat. Nail trimming and brushing teeth might be too advanced for many children, but having the kids lend a hand while you're doing these trickier jobs is a great way to make sure they understand the amount of care that goes into keeping a pet clean and comfortable. Your child can offer your pets rewards like treats and praise to keep the experience positive for all involved.
- **Litter boxes, pee pads, and other elimination areas.** While not the most enjoyable part of pet ownership for adults or children, cleaning up waste and keeping elimination areas clean is very important and your child can help where appropriate. Be sure to show them how to properly wash their hands after handling litter box items and other soiled materials as well as how to safely dispose of waste.

How Kids Can Help Provide Daily Enrichment for Your Dog or Cat

You can illustrate the importance of enrichment for pets by talking to your child about how happy it makes them when they get to play with different kinds of toys, spend time with different friends, and experience new things. Dogs and cats need those same experiences to live full, happy lives — and they rely on their humans to make it happen. Here are some ideas to get you started.

- **Backyard excursion.** Have the kids take your dog – safely with a leash and a collar or harness – on a little tour of the backyard. Make sure the leash and yard are secure so that your child can focus on your dog's exploration and enjoyment of the yard. It can be fun for children to watch their pet's behavior and see how they use their senses to interact with nature.
- **Playtime.** Playtime with your dog or cat and one of their favorite toys is an easy and fun way for your kids to engage and bond with your pet. Select play that is age and size appropriate, both for the children and the pet. For dogs, fetch is a great game to start with. For cats, a feather bird toy on a string can be fun for everyone. As always, have your child reward your pet for a good play session with treats and praise.
- **Training time (short and sweet).** Daily training for your dog or cat can be done in brief, 2- to 5-minute sessions. All dogs, regardless of their breed, should be given some level of training (like sit, stay, off, take) using positive reinforcement. And despite their reputation, many cats can also be trained to respond to simple commands (with treat rewards, of course!). Getting kids involved helps build their relationship with the family pet and develops concentration and observation skills, too.
- **Getting creative.** The best part of enrichment is that it can mean just about anything that gives your pet exposure to something interesting and gets their mind working. Let your child have some fun coming up with new ways to engage and entertain your pets: making obstacle courses from things around the house, creating food or treat puzzles, and experimenting with different toys and styles of play – the list is endless. You may find that enrichment time works both ways and can be just as rewarding for your child as it is for your cat or dog.

While there are undoubtedly times when having kids and pets together in the house can feel like a circus, your child's relationship with a pet can provide experiences and a level of understanding they cannot obtain any other way. When kids are involved in caring for pets, they learn and truly appreciate the work, responsibility, and joy that come with pet ownership. The loving bond between children and their pets can bring happiness to the whole household.

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