

FAMILY PETS

by Sally Burgess, Forefront Families LLC

I love animals. There is nothing like a faithful cat or dog to sooth stress, to be of comfort and to be good company for family members. Most kids want a pet. It could be a fish, a dog, a cat, a bird, a hamster, a snake or a ferret. Almost without exception the parent ends up with the responsibility of the little beastie and the child moves on to wanting a drum set.

Because of my partiality to animals, I worry when I see parents give in to their kids' pleading without really asking the important questions. Is it practical to have this pet? Can we afford to buy it? Can we afford to feed it? Can we afford veterinary care and vaccinations? Have we got enough room? How much attention and exercise does this pet need? Who will look after it when we go on vacation? Is it a pet all family members will appreciate? (Some pets pervade the whole household e.g. dogs, while others are confined e.g. fish or turtles.) When the kids grow tired of looking after it or leave home, will the pet continue to be nurtured and cared for as part of the family? Could the pet be dangerous?

I have a friend whose kids were always bringing home pets. One son decided he wanted a python. He brought it home and put it in a big fish tank in his bedroom. There it stayed, hibernating for long periods. One night it woke from its long slumber and escaped to find water. It slithered into the bathroom where it wrapped itself around the commode and stuck its head in the toilet bowl for a long drink. Along came father to make a late night pit stop. Fortunately, he turned the light on. One look at the snake and his hair stood on end! He bolted down to his son's room, dragged him out of bed and made him retrieve his pet. Needless to say the snake went to a new home at the zoo the very next day.

Animals bring a unique richness to families who love and care for them. They are a wonderful way to teach kids to be gentle, loving and kind. However, when kids are rough and tease animals, the animal will retaliate to protect itself. It will then be labeled as bad tempered and often be shunned by the family. When adults don't have a natural affinity towards animals, they may not notice when their pet is in discomfort or fearful through being roughly handled by a child. An inherited pet is often ignored and seen as a nuisance and another expense to have to deal with.

Speaking of being humane to animals brings me to talk about insects and tadpoles. Many a poor little grasshopper, worm, or tadpole has died in a glass jar in some child's bedroom. It is great for kids to study these precious little creatures up close, but they need to learn that all living things will only survive in their natural environment where they can feed and water themselves. While captured, they need to be treated with respect. They deserve to stay alive. Parents can encourage kids to learn about particular insects by finding out most

of their information on the Internet. Then they may catch one of the species and study it up close for 24 hours maximum before returning it to its natural environment.

Here are some suggestions regarding care of pets. It is 'all about the pet'. An animal deserves to live a long and happy life just like its owner. Before getting a pet it is important to realistically ask the questions posed above. If parents do not want to end up with the responsibility of a pet, then don't allow the kids to have one. Dogs need to be loved and disciplined just like kids do. Kids need to be taught the responsibilities of looking after pets. They have no voice. They rely on us for their comfort and care.

If you have any comments or questions on this subject, please do not hesitate to contact us at sally@forefrontfamilies.org. We invite you to also check out our website at www.forefrontfamilies.org and our blog site at www.forefrontfamilies.blogspot.com for further assistance.