

# Pets, Babies, and Young Children

Pets can be a wonderful addition to a family. However, there are important safety issues you will want to keep in mind as a parent and pet owner.

Read on for information from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) about how to stay safe and healthy with pets.

## How to Help Prepare Your Pet

This section is for dog or cat owners who are expecting a baby.

Before your pet and newborn meet, here are tips to help prepare your pet.

- Before baby arrives, play sounds of babies crying or cooing. If you have a motorized swing, turn it on so that your pet gets used to the noises and motion.
- Let your pet smell clothing or a blanket with your baby's scent.
- Be alert for signs of aggression or jealousy in your pet. Territorial or jealous pets can become aggressive. Do not leave your pet unsupervised near your baby.
- If your baby has siblings, they can help by spending extra time with your pet.
- Keep your pet out of your baby's sleeping area. Your pet's fur or dander may irritate your baby's breathing passages.

If this is your first child, talk with your veterinarian (who knows your pet and your pet's breed) about how your pet may respond to a new baby in the house.

## Questions to Think About Before Getting a Pet

This section is for parents who are considering owning a pet.

Before you select a pet, take time to research what would be the best choice for your family. Pets need to be fed, cleaned up after, and taken to the veterinarian, and some need a lot of attention and exercise.

Bringing a pet into the home will work best if you have carefully selected a pet that fits your family's expectations and lifestyle. Here are questions you may ask when deciding what pet to choose. The first 5 questions are derived from the American Veterinary Medical Association website at [www.avma.org](http://www.avma.org).

- *Do you already have a pet?* If yes, your veterinarian can discuss how another pet might fit in with your current pet.
- *What type of pet do you and your family want?* An active dog to go running with? A pet that can learn and do tricks? A pet that can cuddle on the couch with you? Do you have a specific size or breed in mind?  
Learn as much as you can about how the breed interacts with children and people. For instance, while any dog can bite, specific dog characteristics, such as size, strength, and breed, can pose different risks. Some breeds are known to cause frequent or severe biting injuries. Also, having more than one dog, or unneutered male dogs, increases the risk of dog bites.  
Wild animals should not be kept as pets. A home environment does not provide for the needs of a wild animal. Leave wild animals wild!
- *How much time and space do you have?* Some pets need lots of attention to be healthy, and if no one is home for long periods of

time, these pets will not receive that attention. Some pets need a lot of space to run and play. Bringing them into a small apartment can cause them stress and lead to behavioral problems. Also, some apartments limit the size of animal allowed. Find out the needs of the pet and the rules where you live so that you can choose a pet that will be a good fit and happy in your home.

- *Are you ready for the responsibility?* Pet care should not be the responsibility of a child, although children can participate in the care of a pet. Pet care is an adult responsibility. For example, you will need to
  - Plan for daily care that includes not just feeding but attention and exercise.
  - Schedule regular visits to the veterinarian. Your pets may need deworming medications, flea control, shots, and tooth care. A healthy pet is less likely to pass on infections to people.
  - Think about obedience training if you have a dog. The training is helpful in teaching dogs to understand what you expect and in teaching you and your child how to understand dog behavior.
- *Do you have money in your budget to care for a pet?* Find out ahead of time about how much care will cost. You will need to pay for food, pet toys and accessories, regular and emergency veterinarian visits, and, when you're on vacation, pet care. Some breeds of pets have special needs and may need special food or grooming.
- *Is your child developmentally ready for a pet?* Keep in mind that younger children may not know how to properly handle a pet. They may poke or pull at a pet (treat it like a toy), and that pet may bite back in defense. In general, by age 5 or 6 years, children are old enough to know how to handle, respect, and care for a pet.
- *Does anyone in the house have allergies?* Dander from pets can trigger symptoms of eczema, hay fever, or asthma. Before getting a pet, talk with your family doctors.
- *Does anyone in the house have an immune disorder?* Animals carry germs. People with immune system problems can get sick more easily than other people from pets. Before getting a pet, talk with your family doctors.

## How to Prevent Dog Bites

Each year, more than 4.5 million people in the United States are bitten by dogs, and of the 800,000 Americans who receive medical attention for dog bites, at least half are children.

Children are, by far, the most common age-group injured by dog bites and are far more likely to be severely injured, particularly in the head and neck. Most dog bites affecting young children occur during everyday activities and while they interact with familiar dogs, such as the family dog or a friend's dog. Remember, because most dog bites involve familiar animals, prevention starts in your home.

Almost 1 in 5 people bitten by dogs requires medical attention. For children, the injuries are more likely to be serious because most injuries occur in the head, face, or neck. Parents should be aware of simple steps that can prevent dog bites. Here are some tips from the official AAP website for parents, [HealthyChildren.org](http://HealthyChildren.org).

- Never leave a small child and a dog alone together, no matter if it is the family dog, a dog known to you, or a dog that you have been assured is wellbehaved. Any dog can bite.

- Do not allow your child to play aggressive games with a dog, such as tug-of-war or wrestling, as these can lead to bites.
- Teach your child to ask a dog owner for permission before she pets any dog.
- Let a dog sniff you before petting it, and stay away from the face or tail. Pet the dog gently, and avoid eye contact, particularly at first. Have your child do the same.
- Never bother a dog that is sleeping, eating, or caring for puppies. Dogs in these situations are more likely to respond aggressively, even with a person who is familiar to them. Have your child do the same.

- Teach your child to move calmly and slowly around dogs.
- Teach your child that if a dog is behaving in a threatening manner—for example, growling and barking—to remain calm, avoid eye contact with the dog, and back away slowly until the dog loses interest and leaves.
- If you are knocked over by a dog, curl up in a ball and protect your eyes and face with arms and fists. Have your child do the same.

Visit [HealthyChildren.org](https://www.HealthyChildren.org) for more information.

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