

Children and safety with pets

The Royal Children's Hospital Safety Centre, Melbourne 2008



Growing up with a pet can be a wonderful experience for children. A pet will provide hours of fun and entertainment as well as an opportunity for children to learn to love, respect and care for other creatures. Alongside the joys of pet ownership also come the responsibilities, for example grooming, exercising and feeding. School aged children are better able to learn these skills and will delight in taking care of their special friend. Younger children and pets will need closer supervision to ensure both their safety.

By far the majority of family pets are dogs and cats. Some other pets include rabbits, guinea pigs, hamsters, fish, birds, reptiles and horses. Whether the animal is big or small has fur, gills or scales, the best way for children to learn how to properly care for it is by following the right example. Children do not always appreciate that animals do not follow 'human rules' of behaviour, therefore the more you understand animal behaviours and habits, the better you can model the correct ways to care for your pet. The time spent in getting to know your pet will ensure that you have many enjoyable and rewarding years together.



Choosing a new pet

If you are considering buying a pet then it is worthwhile seeking some information first. Spend a little time at your local library researching animals; speak to a vet, an animal breeder, or other pet owners before deciding what to buy. If you prefer a dog or cat, the Petcare Information and Advisory Service (telephone: 1800 631 784, internet: www.petnet.com.au) can assist you to choose a suitable breed for your family situation and lifestyle.

When you already have a pet in the household

A new baby in the household can sometimes be threatening for a pet such as a dog or cat that has been the centre of attention for years. Once a curious child starts to crawl, your pet may need protection – from squeezing, poking and thrown objects! There are some simple rules to follow, particularly relating to dogs, because dogs have the potential to cause serious injury if innocently provoked:

Before your baby arrives, start to get your dog used to unexpected and gentle pulls of the ears, tail or paws. Make this playful and reward your dog.

Prior to bringing your baby home from the hospital, have your dog get used to its unfamiliar scent. Allow your dog to occasionally sniff something that the baby has been wrapped in, such as a rug or clothing.

When the dog and baby are in the same room, praise and reward your dog so that it starts to relate good things with the baby. Ignoring the dog, even without realising you are doing so because of changes in routine, can create a negative association between dog and baby.

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Main causes of injury

Most children who are injured as a result of dog bites are under the age of five years. Whilst some dog bites occur in public places the majority of children injured by dogs are bitten by their own dog or another familiar dog in someone's home. It is important to remember that all dogs irrespective of breed can bite.

The main health risk to children associated with other animals include infections due to:

- Bites and scratches from cats and small mammals, e.g. rabbits, guinea pigs, hamsters.
- Handling of birds, particularly those from the parrot family.
- Children eating dirt that contains animal faeces.

Although less likely, a cat curled up beside a sleeping baby in a cot could potentially result in the child being smothered. Children have been known to drown in fishponds that have not been secured with wire netting and children who live on farms are at higher risk of injury when not supervised around farm animals. Children, particularly girls ten years and older, are occasionally seriously injured in horse related accidents, either when riding in a horse drawn vehicle or whilst horse riding.

Reduce the risk of dog bites by:

- Always supervising children near dogs.
- Ensuring your dog is properly trained to sit, stay, drop and come.
- Choosing a breed that is suited to your families' lifestyle and environment.
- Making sure your dog is friendly with children.

Teach your child to:

- Always ask permission from the owner before slowly approaching an unfamiliar dog.
- Avoid approaching dogs that are sleeping or eating.
- Stand still like a fence post if approached by a strange dog and not squeal or jump.
- Avoid eye contact with the dog by looking at their own feet.

For more information about preventing dog bites, refer to the Safety Centre's Dogs 'n' Kids® brochure, booklet and poster.

Be prepared

You should only own a dog or cat or any other pet if you have the space, time and money to care for it properly.

Clean cat litter trays daily and keep out of reach of children.

Keep the cat out of the nursery.

Install firm wire mesh over a fishpond.

Have children wash their hands after handling animals and before eating.

If visiting or staying on a farm, closely supervise children. Provide a safe play area that is separated from work areas.

Choose an appropriate horse for the rider. Size and temperament of the horse needs to suit the experience, skill and age of the rider. Horses are large, powerful and often unpredictable animals that need to be respected and understood.

Choose an older horse (over five years) for a child or beginner and make sure they use Australian standards equipment, such as helmet, heeled riding boots and stirrups.

Smooth-soled, elastic sided, heeled boots should be worn when riding a horse while sturdy boots are recommended during non-riding handling.

Saddles need to be the appropriate size for both the rider and the horse. Stirrups must be 2–3 cm larger than the rider's boot. All riding equipment must be regularly checked, adjusted for fit and well maintained. Reins and ropes should be handled in such a way as to avoid trapping fingers.

References and further information:

- The Petcare Information and Advisory Service
www.petnet.com.au
Telephone toll free 1800 631 784
- Victorian Injury Surveillance Unit Monash University Accident Research Centre
www.monash.edu.au/muarc/visu
- Equestrian Federation of Australia
www.efanational.com
- The Domestic (Feral & Nuisance) Animal Act 81/1994 now provides a permit system for breeds of dogs declared to be restricted.
www.dse.vic.gov.au
- Dogs & Kids information kit from The Royal Children's Hospital Safety Centre
Telephone (03) 9345 5085
www.rch.org.au/safetycentre



For further information
about the Safety Centre
Telephone 9345 5085
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