At What Age Should Your Child Have a Pet?
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I am frequently asked about the right age for children when it comes to adding a companion animal to the family. In general, I often say that a child should be about six years old but the more accurate answer is that it depends on the particular child and the preparation and education done by the parent. My daughter, as a preschooler, was as gentle with our cats as I could’ve ever hoped for. On the other hand, I have been in homes with children who are six or older where the decision to bring home a pet resulted in injury (either to the child or the companion animal).

Choose the Right Pet
Don’t make impulsive decisions about bringing an animal into your home. This is an important decision that affects the animal and your family. Take the time and do your homework to make sure you’ve made a good decision. Too many animals end up being brought to shelters, banished to the outdoors or worse, euthanized, because of bad decisions on the part of the new owner.

Make sure your family will have the time for a pet. While it may seem like a fun idea at first, will this pet get the time and attention necessary? Life for an animal is more than just shelter, food and water. This pet will need training, attention, and most of all, love.

Nothing Comes Before Safety
Regardless of a child’s age, there is nothing more important than safety when it comes to interaction with an animal. If you’ve had a pet in your family for years and that animal has always been gentle and tolerant, it’s still important to teach your children how to interact, how to read body language signals and when to leave the pet alone.

Your child’s safety isn’t just limited to the pets you have in your own home, it extends to any animal your child meets. It’s crucial that you instruct your children to always ask an owner before approaching or attempting to pet an unfamiliar animal.

Teach your children not to approach animals who are wandering by themselves. Even if the animal appears friendly, children should be instructed to always go get an adult if a dog or cat wanders into the yard. A dog wagging his tail doesn’t always mean he’s happy. This display can also indicate anxiety or uncertainty. Your children should learn to be cautious and not assume all animals are friendly.

Even as adults, it’s important for us to use common sense when approaching animals, yet I’ve repeatedly seen people make careless mistakes. Keep in mind that your children are watching what you do and they will imitate that behavior.

Body Language 101
There are some basics to animal body language that your children should be taught. Explain what certain ear positions mean, what particular body postures are saying and how to interpret vocalizations.

Gentle Touch
Model the behavior you want to see in your children. Show them how to approach the family pet, how to pet with an open hand and where to pet (certain animals have preferences). Also teach your children not to pick up the pet. Being petted is one thing, but it can put the pet over the edge if she’s grabbed and held.

Supervision
Animals and young children should always be supervised. Situations can change in a heartbeat so never allow them alone together under the children are old enough to fully understand how to interact safely with animals – and even then, be very mindful about how much freedom to allow.
Make sure there are safe areas for the pet that are basically "kid free" zones. All pets should have places where they can go to chill out and relax.

**Love That Lasts a Lifetime**
Although all the caution and supervision may make it sound as if there’s such a risk involved in a child/animal relationship, remember that there’s educational safety and supervision involved in everything your children first experience. Whether it’s introducing your baby to new foods, riding a bike, having a sleepover at a friend’s house, walking to school on their own, or riding in a car, children have to learn safety rules. So don’t let that discourage you from giving your children the opportunity to experience loving an animal.

The companionship of an animal can be one of the most rewarding gifts a child receives. The relationship can also provide valuable lessons for children that will benefit them throughout life. Through their relationship with the family pet they learn compassion, empathy, patience and kindness. Having had those relationships with animals can also be something your children will cherish for the rest of their lives.

**Additional Resources**
You can find specific safety instructions on preparing the cat for the new baby as well as child safety with cats in the book *Think Like a Cat* by Pam Johnson-Bennett.