

# ADOPTING A FAMILY PET

STORY BY SHANNON GRABER

**It's inevitable as your child grows older. Sooner or later, all parents will be asked, "Can I please get a \_\_\_?" (Fill in the blank with the name of your child's favorite animal.)**

**The question can come from your child as soon as your child can speak or it may come a little later at age 5 or 6, but eventually, the question will arise. When it does, be knowledgeable before you say "yes" or "no."**

"The loyalty, loving nature, fun and entertainment that animals can bring to your life is immeasurable," said Michelle Manker, president and founder of A Critters Chance Inc. But, she, like other experts working with animal-rights groups, rescues and shelters around Indiana, quickly note there is more to pet ownership than fun and entertainment. There are many issues to consider, preparations to make, and animal characteristics to research before acquiring a pet.

## TACKLING THE ISSUES

"Pets are not toys," said Miranda Russell, public relations coordinator of the Vanderburgh Humane Society. "They are living creatures with feelings and needs. Adding a pet to your family is a lifetime commitment, be that for 2 years or 18 years. The parent must be committed to the animal, and the child will learn good habits from that exposure. Caring for a pet should be a rewarding experience for the whole family to enjoy."

If you are considering adding a pet to the family, consider the following questions provided by The Points to PAWnder Series by Indiana Proactive Animal Welfare Inc.

- Ask yourself:
  - Can we afford a pet? Pets' care typically cost thousands of dollars a year.
  - Do we have time for a pet? Parents should ask themselves if they are willing to devote a significant portion of their free time to doing things like: feeding the pet, exercising the pet, taking the pet to the veterinarian, grooming the pet, taking the pet to a trainer and cleaning up after the pet.
  - Do we have space for a pet? Some pets require more space than others, so evaluate your home environment before adopting a pet.
  - Will a pet fit into our lifestyle? Consider if this is the right time in your family's life and if you are ready to have a pet for 10, 15 or 20 years.
- It is sometimes difficult to know when to bring a pet into a child's life.
  - To gauge your child's maturity level and readiness for certain types of pets and pet responsibilities, consider

how he completes his school work, cleans his bedroom, and takes care of his belongings, said Russell. Also, consider how much time your child will have to spend with a pet versus all his other extracurricular activities.

Carolyn Valachovic-Monroe, education coordinator of Indiana Proactive Animal Welfare Inc. said, "A pet can be brought into a family at any time. However, the type of pet and who will be responsible for the pet will vary depending on the child's age. A young child cannot be expected to walk a dog or clean the litter box of a cat, so a parent would be the primary caretaker of the pet. However, even young children can be given certain chores relating to the care of a pet, such as feeding a pet or giving it water, with supervision from the parent."

Before adopting a pet, Kelsey Cook, secretary of the Animal Protection Coalition Inc. suggests parents remember to talk to their children about the animal's life expectancy. "Make sure your children understand that animals do not live forever," she said.

## CHOOSING A PET

Sometimes the most difficult choice is deciding what kind of pet to adopt. Before adding a pet to the family, experts suggest taking your child to a rescue, animal shelter or friend's house to make the child familiar with the animal or the kind of animal he or she wishes to adopt.

Russell said the VHS encourages parents to bring their children to meet any animal they are considering adopting.

"Give the animal and child a chance to meet before the animal ever goes home," said Russell. "This ensures that chaos isn't going to strike when you get the new animal home. A bad experience causes stress on the child, the animal, the parents and everyone involved if the animal must be returned."

Here are a few characteristics and issues surrounding each type of pet to help you get started on making an educated decision for your family.

**FISH:** Fish can be cheap and inexpensive pets, costing as little as 25 cents each. They can provide lots of color to a room and be enjoyable for young children to watch if the fish are in a secure aquarium. Before buying fish, remember they require food, certain water and environment conditions and aquarium maintenance. Also, some fish have a short life span.

**SMALL ANIMALS:** Small animals are great starter pets.

"A hamster or guinea pig is a good starter pet, but parents' involvement is a must for the survival of the pet," said Russell.

Guinea pigs are the happiest when there are two or more in the cage.

Guinea pigs make great pets for children as long as children are taught how to properly handle them, said Manker.

However, if you are considering adopting a rat, you may want to wait until your child is older. Manker says, "Rats tend to make good pets with children a little older,

due to the fact they are wiggly and move around a lot, and young children might try to hold them too tightly and get bitten."

**BIRDS:** The Humane Society of the United States list birds as the third most popular pet in the United States after the cat and dog.

Birds should be adopted for older children, advised Manker.

Finches and canaries can live eight to 10 years, and cockatiels, parakeets and lovebirds can live to be 20 years old. Like the guinea pig, many birds like to have companions in their cages with them.

Birds require water, food, cages, bedding and maintenance like nail trimming.

**REPTILES:** Like birds, Manker advised that reptiles should be saved for older children. Concerning the bird and reptile, Manker said, "Their care is a lot more intensive, and the knowledge level is much higher to care for them. Again, the parents need to be involved."

Most reptile pets are turtles, lizards or snakes. Reptiles require special diets and habitats. They can grow quite large. A 6-inch iguana can grow to 5 feet in five years.

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Also, reptiles may carry salmonella, and currently, the Humane Society of the United States is not recommending them as pets, according to its Web site.

**RABBITS:** Rabbits become popular pets around Easter. Manker says rabbits are great pets for children because they tend to be loving and enjoy being petted. But, before committing to a rabbit, keep in mind they can reproduce quickly and can live 5 to 10 years. They also require food, water, bedding and fur maintenance.

**CATS:** "Cats are pretty self sufficient," said Valachovic-Monroe. "They do not need as much room as a dog, but they still need attention and your time."

Cats require immunizations, collars, grooming, medications if necessary, food and a litter box. There are a variety of breeds, and parents should investigate the breed and its temperament before adopting a cat.

**DOGS:** Before adopting a dog, the parents should learn as much as possible about the dog's breed. Consider the breed's, size, exercise requirements, assertiveness and compatibility with children. Dogs like the St. Bernard grow large and need more space. However, all dogs generally need more space to run than cats.

Dogs need collars, grooming, immunizations, food, water, bedding and a place to run and use the restroom.

## Points to "pawnder" before you choose

**HORSES:** Many children love the idea of owning a horse. "Horses are usually better for older children to teenagers because they have better motor skills and usually have more common sense than younger children," said Cook, who also represents Indiana Horse Rescue. "They also will be able to help with their care better than really young children, since caring for a horse can be physically more demanding (than other pets)."

Cook suggests parents adopt a smaller animal for their child before adopting a horse to see if the child is mature enough to have a pet. Horses are a lifetime commitment. They can live to be 30 to 40 years of age, said Cook.

Cook estimates a horse can be fed for \$50 to \$75 per month, but room and board, vaccinations, deworming and other medications are additional costs to horse ownership.

Before adopting a horse, Cook suggests families volunteer at a horse rescue or other horse stable to become familiar with horses and their care.

"Riding a horse is unlike any other activity that people do with other animals," Cook said. "There is something about being on the back of a horse that is good for children mentally. It opens up different senses and emotions. It teaches them respect. Horses are very large animals and you have to respect them. They will do anything and give with all their hearts if you love them and ask them nicely."

If parents are not capable of owning a horse, but would like their child to learn to ride horses, some stables offer riding lessons for a fee.

## WHERE TO FIND A PET

Locally, pets can be adopted at the Vanderburgh Humane Society.

"The majority of our animals are dogs and cats, and we usually have rabbits," said Russell. "We also have hamsters, rats, gerbils, guinea pigs, reptiles and ferrets from time to time."

The VHS accepts any animal that is considered a pet. Once the VHS even had a pot-bellied pig surrendered to it.

To find out more information about the VHS and its animals, visit [www.vhslifesaver.org](http://www.vhslifesaver.org).

If the VHS does not have the pet you wish to adopt, consider looking at animal shelters and rescues. A list can be found at [www.Indiana-paw.com](http://www.Indiana-paw.com). Also, you can visit [www.petfinder.com](http://www.petfinder.com), and enter the type of animal you wish to adopt, and it will direct you to where you can find this pet.



Kael Wilson, 3, son of Kevin and Esther Wilson of Evansville, gives a treat to anxiously awaiting boxer Millie.

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