

Ask the Pediatrician: How old should my children be before we adopt a pet?

May 17 2021, by Dr. Laura Marusinec, American Academy Of Pediatrics



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Q: Should my children be a certain age before we adopt a dog or cat?

A: Having a cat or dog can be emotionally rewarding for children and adults, and owning a dog also can get the family out of the house for fresh air and exercise on daily walks.

The age of your children is one factor to consider when adopting a dog or cat. Generally, because many dog bite injuries happen to young children, it may be safest to wait until your child is older than 4. But think about your children and their individual maturity levels, because each child develops differently. There are 6-year-olds who are calm around animals and may be ready for a dog or cat, just as there are 10-year-olds who may be too active and impatient to be around pets.

Also keep in mind that when you have a baby or toddler, you are already juggling a lot. This may not be an ideal time to adopt a puppy or kittens, especially if you've never had a pet. Waiting until your family has more time to devote to the pet, you know whether your child has allergies, and your child is old enough to understand how to behave around animals is a smart move.

If your children do recognize the importance of being calm and quiet around a new pet as the animal gets comfortable in the home, then it might be a good time to adopt.

Discuss the responsibilities with your children and take your time when looking at animals. Animal shelter staff members and responsible breeders should have ideas for potential pets for you based on your situation and children's ages. Be honest with them about your [home life](#) and children's activity and patience levels.

Think about both the needs of the pet and the safety of your children. When it comes to [dogs](#), there are many breeds to choose from, along with mixes. It's important to make sure the temperament and other traits of the pet don't put your child at increased risk of injury. A large, strong dog may not be the best fit for a home with young children. Avoid [animals](#) that have behavioral issues or a history of aggression or bites.

Even if your children are respectful of the pet, you will need to closely

supervise interactions between your young children and the animal. This is to monitor for possible aggression issues, and to ensure your children are not pulling on the dog's ears or grabbing the cat's tail. An aggravated or fearful animal sometimes will lash out and scratch or bite.

Many bites happen during playful roughhousing, because children don't always realize when a pet gets overstimulated or irritated. Your children should be old enough to understand not to put their face near the animal's face, and not to tease a pet by grabbing toys or treats from them.

Ensure your children understand a pet should never be yelled at or hit. Everyone in the house should use [positive reinforcement](#) to encourage ideal behavior. If you see signs of animal mistreatment by a child, talk to your pediatrician for guidance.

You likely will be doing most of the work taking care of the pet, of course, but if you have [children](#) who are roughly 5 or older, they can be expected to help you with some of the simple chores, such as leashing the dog, giving out treats after walks or refilling the water bowl. Taking care of an animal is a great way to learn about responsibility and caring for others.

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