

# Taming the Family Zoo

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**Pets and kids.** Need I say more?

Yes, we have pets in my home. Two very fat and very lovely cats. We had pets who are now in animal heaven: countless goldfish (floaters) and one dog. Our beloved miniature schnauzer, Heidi. The faithful

pooch died last summer. Nearly broke my heart, it did. Almost enough to make me long for a pet-free home forever.

Almost.

You see, Heidi had a history with the Aronson family. It began when I was pregnant with Christopher, and we'd just move to San Francisco. Heidi the young adult had decided on our move in day to take a snooze – in the middle of the street. Seeing the silver fur, I dashed out of the house and to her aid thinking she was sick or worse. She licked my hand and followed me inside.

I immediately called our neighbors the Garfields (their names and number were on her collar tag) who were delighted Heidi had been found. The elderly couple adored her; though she was clearly Marilee's dog. Several years later Marilee died. When Allen could no longer walk well enough to care for her, Heidi Aronson joined our family.

She was my constant companion, even more so as I walked hills and organized our new home and nursery after our move from San Francisco, during my pregnancy with Payne.

When she died at the ripe old age of 13 of an enlarged heart last summer, I was crushed. I still look beneath my desk occasionally and can almost see her there by my feet. Faithful she was, by my side day and night. Sometimes it's hard not to cry, when I think of the last few months of being barely able to get around.

Heidi's passing was enough to make me firm in my resolve that there wouldn't be anymore pets in this house for a while. After all, who needs that kind of heartbreak – especially with kids around? Yet as the months wore on in our petless domicile, the cacophony of pet pleas began to get louder:

“Mommy, can I have a \_\_\_?” (dog, cat, rat, bird, pony – just fill in the blank).

Most kids love pets. And despite our sadness as a family in losing Heidi, my kids still did, too.

They're probably a lot like yours -- given their druthers every nook and cranny of the house and yard would be filled with pets. Still we, like most parents, figured we would end up feeding and taking care of said pets.

Therefore, the answer to the above question was usually a resounding “No!”

And it was in our house – until last fall. Once you get over the inevitable heartbreak of observing a pet's complete lifecycle, you don't have to be Dr. Doolittle to realize that pet ownership offers many benefits for kids. Pet therapy in hospitals and nursing homes has demonstrated how animals can lift people's spirits. It worked in my home to help me remember the love I had for Heidi -- instead of

focusing solely on the heartbreak of missing her. It worked in our home. And it can work in your home as well.

## **Advantages of Pet Ownership**

Here are just a few ways pets can enrich your child's life:

- Pets can be a real comfort to children under stress. We've all had those times when we feel no one loves or understands us. Somehow it really helps to bury your face in a loving dog or cat's tummy and just cry it out.
- Pets offer children unconditional love. Step on Poochie's tail, yell at him, even take him to the groomer – and you're still his favorite person in the world. Go figure.
- If you allow Fluffy or Spot on the bed, he or she can be a real comfort for kids who are afraid of the dark or who don't want to sleep alone. This, in turn, can be a real comfort for parents who do want to sleep alone.
- Pets, especially dogs, are reassuring for kids who are alone in the house occasionally. Latch key kids have a living being to welcome them home. Teens feel comfortable alone while the parents have a night out.
- Pets are an excellent way to teach children about loving, caring and sharing. Show your kids how to care for a pet by the way that you care for it. If you kick the dog, they will, too.
- By caring for an animal that cannot talk, children learn lifelong skills, such as reading nonverbal cues, that they can use with people later. Kids who own pets score higher on tests for social skills, empathy and self esteem.
- Pets are an easy source of entertainment. Most furry pets are fun to play with. Dogs fetch. Cats chase string. You can even train them. Some children even show their animals.
- Kids who grow up with pets are actually less likely to develop allergies than kids who grow up solo. Scientists speculate that perhaps that's because they acquire immunities to the animals early on.
- Pets provide biology lessons. Not only can alert kids learn the facts of life, but they also learn about the life cycle from birth to death.

Finally, pets are an excellent way to teach a child responsibility. Though this is often touted as one of the main reasons to let children have pets, I think it's overrated.

While most young children are not mature enough for such responsibility, they are old enough for the main value that I think pets offer –something to love that will love them back. Once that love is established, responsibility will gradually follow as the child matures.

## **Disadvantages of Pet Ownership**

Now let's address the parental knee-jerk response to the perennial question, "Can I have a \_\_\_?" The resounding "No!"

Your instincts are correct. Pets *are* a lot of trouble. They can be dirty, messy, noisy, expensive, etc.

Here are just a few of the concerns that you should consider before agreeing to any pet – big or small; furry, finned or feathered.

- Animals are messy. Even caged animals seem to be able to hurl shavings to the far corners of the room. And we won't even discuss the repercussions of a cat with a hairball.
- Animals are a lot of work. Pets need to be fed, bathed and groomed. Dogs need walking. Cats need litter boxes scooped. Aquariums and cages must be cleaned.
- Often, this will be your work. You cannot punish a negligent child by punishing the animal. If the kid goes off to school without feeding the rat, you can't let it go without food or water all day. Just realize that there are times – no matter how old or responsible the child – that the pet will be your responsibility by default.
- Pets make vacations difficult. Consider how often you are away from home and how easily you will be able to get someone to look after your pet. If you have many animals or exotic animals, you will probably either need to board them when you're away or hire a house sitter – both of which can add up quickly. The best bet is to get a pet that's easily cared for and switch off with a neighbor.

- Animals eventually get sick and/or die. Can you say Pet Insurance? Seriously, you might want to check into it. An animal is a member of your family and you cannot let it suffer. What kind of parenting skills would you be teaching your child? Even a box turtle can rack up the vet bills. Be sure that you are willing to pay what it takes to keep your pet healthy.
- Pets are expensive. “But Mom, the rat is only \$2!” Yes, but then there’s the \$35 cage; the \$9.95 bag of shavings; the \$4.95 house; the \$11.95 bag of food and the \$6.95 rat care book. And he will need toys, of course, and treats. And he will need these things for the two or three years that the rat lives. And that’s just a rat!
- Pets pose some dangers. Some pets bite. Some scratch. Some carry diseases. If you get a pet, teach your child how to handle it safely and sanitarily. (Add vet bills to the item above.)

Wait! Aren’t we missing something? I saved the worst for last: Kids lose interest.

Of course, they do -- kids lose interest in everything. Their attention spans are about a nanosecond long. Why would you assume it would be different with pets? The real secret of getting your child a pet is knowing that this is probably your pet. You will be the one who is ultimately responsible – just like you are ultimately responsible for all the other lives in your household. If you don’t want that responsibility or if you don’t like cats, dogs, snakes, whatever – don’t get it. Period. Skip the rest of this chapter. On to Chapter 11!

## **To Pet or Not to Pet**

Still trying to decide? Whether you get a pet depends on how much time you are willing to spend with it, especially with younger kids. Pets impact the whole family, not just the “owner” (or, if you live in enlightened areas, the “guardian”).

Consider these questions:

- How old is your child? Most experts agree that kids under age 6 are generally not capable of understanding an animal’s needs and caring for it properly. If you get a pet for a young child, realize that it is truly your pet.
- Don’t go into the situation with false expectations. That’s not fair to the kid or the animal. Many advise starting out young children with easy to care for animals such as mice, turtles or

fish. But as we've discussed above, pets can be beneficial for young children, even if they cannot assume full responsibility for them.

- How mature is your child? Some kids are more responsible than others but all will have time conflicts occasionally. All will forget occasionally. So you have to decide how much you're willing to help.
- How will the pet affect the rest of the family? Do any family members have allergies? Fears?
- How many kids do you have? Needless to say, they will all want a pet of their own. If you get one kid a dog, does the next kid also get to demand a dog? Kids may share bedrooms; they may even share toothbrushes (ugh) but they draw the line when it comes to pets.
- Just be aware of this phenomenon going in and have an idea of how you will respond to it. You might say that either they share that dog or no one gets anything. (That will last until the dog arrives.) You might say that everyone gets to choose one pet right now. (But do you really want three new pets at once? They would be cute together and they would grow up being friends instead of predators and prey.) You might say that age 7 is the magic number and as kids reach 7, they can choose a pet – with your approval. Just be prepared for this issue.

## Choosing a Pet

No pet should be an impulse buy. Don't give in to whining and pleading. This is something that will cost you a lot of time and money and will be with your family for its entire life.

To make pet ownership a positive experience for all concerned, do some research. Know what you are getting into. If the kids have to research the pet, earn the pet and wait for the pet, they are more likely to appreciate the pet and help care for it once you bring it home.

Pets come in all species, shapes and forms. There's bound to be one that suits your family's needs. Before deciding on a type of pet, consider the following:

- **Expense:** Do you want a \$500 purebred dog or a \$20 parakeet? But look beyond purchase price. Consider how much the animal will cost each year in food, grooming, vet care and other essentials. Where is this money coming from?
- **Allergies and/or phobias:** If Bobby is allergic to cats, why let Cassidy get one? If Kristen is

terrified of dogs, would a lab really be a good choice for Billy?

- ❑ **Housing:** Do you have an appropriate place for the pet? A dog requires either a fenced in yard or walking a couple of times a day.
- ❑ **Lifespan:** How long does the pet live? How long do you want it around? Rats only live a couple of years. While this might be ideal for a kid with a short attention span, it could prove traumatic for a child who has bonded with the creatures. Cockatoos, on the other hand, live up to 70 years. Do you really want a pet that you have to provide for in your will? A friend of mine has carefully calibrated her daughter's pet choices so that they will all die off by the time the child enters college. She wants an entirely empty nest. No muss; no fuss.
- ❑ **Age of pet:** Most kids want baby animals. They want puppies or kittens. Again, think this one through. A lot of people buy puppies when their kid is a toddler thinking how cute it is for them to grow up together. But what you've really done is give yourself two babies at once. And you've cheated your child out of a chance to have a puppy he will be old enough to appreciate. Also young children are often too rough for baby animals – and vice versa. Puppies and kittens may scratch or bite rambunctious youngsters. Save puppies and kittens for older kids.
- ❑ **Compatibility with other pets:** If you have other animals already in your home, consider how a new pet will affect them.
- ❑ **Maintenance:** There are low-maintenance pets (fish, lizards) and high-maintenance pets (parrots, ponies). What level are you interested in? What level do you think you will be interested in a year from now?

## **Determining Your Maintenance Tolerance Levels**

One of the best methods for choosing a pet is picking one whose maintenance requirements best fits your temperament and lifestyle. Here's a quick list of common household pets listed from lowest to highest maintenance. Predictably, younger children are usually better suited for lower maintenance pets while adults cope better with high-maintenance pets.

### **Lowest Maintenance Pets**

These are pets that don't require a lot of nurturing or special care. They don't require grooming,

walking or even petting. Just basic food, water and shelter.

These are good starter pets. They also offer the least payback in terms of returning love and affection.

## **Fish**

Most freshwater fish are inexpensive to buy and inexpensive to maintain after the initial investment of a tank or bowl and accessories. Some fish are hardier than others.

For small kids, go for inexpensive, durable fish, such as goldfish. You don't want floaters to start off your pet career.

To start off, go for a solitary goldfish or beta in a simple bowl. If that's a hit, you can move on to an aquarium. Lighted aquariums can even function as nightlights in a child's bedroom. Maintenance will be simply feeding once or twice a day and cleaning the bowl once a week. If you keep the aquarium away from direct sunlight, algae will grow more slowly.

## **Reptiles and Snakes**

Little boys love lizards and snakes. Moms don't. If your kid is going to have a lizard or snake, be sure there's some adult in the house who's willing to handle it. You've got to have that backup person with pets.

In other words, Dad is probably the go-to guy on this one. Put the reptile in an aquarium with a locked top. You don't want Timmy taking it out without your supervision. Avoid large snakes, such as pythons, that might ingest small children.

Research types of reptiles. Some require live (shudder) food. This may not be the type of behavior you want to instill in your child.

If you are determined, however, at least get a snake that has been trained to accept frozen mice instead of live, running-around mice. Then all you have to do is heat (to room temperature) and serve. Still not my cup of tea.

Some reptiles (like iguanas) grow to five feet long and can be hazardous to other pets. Some (such as pythons) can grow to 13 feet long and be hazardous to the owner. Nuff said. Don't forget to ask how large the reptile will be at adulthood.

Even though reptiles are relatively sturdy, they are still living creatures. Never let young children handle them unsupervised.

Make sure you choose a reptile that is tame and does not try to bite. Good lizard choices are a bearded dragon or a gecko. Good snake choices are a corn snake, rat snake or a king snake.

While reptiles and snakes are easy, they do have some needs: a tank, lights, water and food. Lizards need places to hide and things to perch on. Tropical or desert reptiles will also need a heat source. This will not be cheap. Some even need special thermometers and full-spectrum lighting.

The bearded dragon, for example, will require a 10 gallon terrarium with a screen top the first year and a 40 gallon terrarium as he grows (very, very fast) up to 18 inches.

Many reptiles are omnivores, which means they not only eat fruit and vegetables but steak and mice as well. This is not a simple matter of dropping in some pellets each day.

Reptiles don't need a lot of exercise (though if you released one near me, I would get a lot of exercise) and they don't really need a lot of attention.

Figure on about 15-30 minutes a day to feed them and about an hour a week to clean the tank.

Tortoises and turtles are other good reptile choices. Turtles are amphibians; tortoises are land creatures. Make sure you provide the right environment for your species.

Turtles can be quite affectionate and are quite long lived (30 to 40 years for the box turtle). Even though they look sturdy, take care not to drop them because that could injure their shells or internal organs.

Tortoises in particular should not be handled often.

## **Low Maintenance**

Rodents, such as rats, mice, gerbils, hamsters, etc., make nice starter pets. They are small, furry and cuddly.

But they happily stay in their cages when the kids aren't playing with them.

Other advantages? They are quiet, not very messy and fairly easy to care for. They usually are inexpensive to buy and maintain.

## Rats and Mice

First, remember that mice are not baby rats.

Two different species. Two different personalities.

Rats are especially intelligent and friendly, despite their nasty looking tails.

Mice are cute and fun to watch in the cages, but they are a bit squirmy and nippy for holding and loving.

If you want a love bucket, get a rat.

Hold them at the store and if the rat or mouse is a nipper, request another one.

Also, the younger you get them, the easier they are to tame and bond with.

Male or female? Good question.

Male rat urine can be a bit smelly, plus males will mark territory with a drop of urine – a drawback if you let him out a lot. On the other hand, males are a lot calmer and more loving.

If you change the litter at least once a week, smell should not be an issue, anyway.

You'll need a special place for the rat cage as shavings can be messy. Their cages take up a lot of room. Each rat needs a minimum of two cubic feet. So if you had a rat couple, that would mean a cage 2 feet by 2 feet by 2 feet.

They need to be let out to run around at least a few minutes each day. You (or the kid) will need to supervise this outing as they tend to nibble through telephone cords, electrical wires.

Plus, you don't want them getting lost in your walls or closets.

Rats live two to four years; mice one to three.



## Other Rodents

- **Hamsters:** These guys also need extra vitamin C. They can bite and they're more vocal than most rodents. They are best kept alone.

But know that they are nocturnal and may be a bit sleepy during the day and more active than you would like at night. They live 2 or 3 years.

- **Gerbils:** These are small but fun pets. Not as intelligent or cuddly as rats, but OK. They are happier in pairs so get a couple. They live 2 to 3 years.
- **Guinea pigs:** These chubby little rodents make sweet, gentle pets. Get a pair. They need a large cage and a special diet of hay, vegetables and Vitamin C. They can live 5 to 7 years.

## Small Birds

Birds are usually not good pets for kids under the age of 8. They are not gentle enough to care for them.

Young kids dart about and alarm birds. Small birds, however, make excellent pets for older children.

If you buy a bird that has been hand raised, it should bond readily with its new owner and be quite tame as long as you handle it regularly and gently.

Small birds are easy pets because they are generally confined to the cage and cannot wreak too much havoc. You only need to change the papers in the cage each day and replenish its food and water.

You'll need to do a more thorough cleaning about once a week.

Cockatiels and parakeets are particularly good choices. The smaller birds, such as finches and canaries, are mainly for watching, not petting.

## Cats

In my prejudiced mind, cats are the perfect pets.

They are sweet and cuddly. They're definitely low maintenance – you can go away for a weekend and just leave out food and water for them.

They're not messy – indeed, they are fastidious and will look at you in dismay if you neglect to clean their litter boxes each day.

Of course, they have their drawbacks.

They shed. A lot of people are allergic to them. And they can literally shred furniture and floor coverings.

They are relatively long lived (about 15-20 years) and if you keep them indoors, they are usually healthy animals. Don't get kittens for small children. Cats between 1 and 3 have all the kitten attributes but are a bit hardier and can easily get away from rough little hands.

Be careful introducing a new kitten into a house with dogs, as well.



## Medium Maintenance

### Dogs

I have a bias here. I don't approve of entirely outdoor pets. They get neglected, especially during the winter months.

I feel if you have a pet, it needs to come inside and be part of the family – at least occasionally. Plus, outdoor pets have shorter, unhealthier lives (thanks to cars and other hazards). And they are more likely to transmit disease, pests like fleas and bacteria to your family.

Dogs go through a golden age at about the middle of their lifespan when they are housebroken and calm.

They no longer chew on your shoes and they often come when called.

This golden age only lasts a few years. At the beginning and the end of their lives, dogs can be a lot of work.



Puppies need house training,

they need to learn the rules of the house. They chew up everything. They are rowdy and rambunctious.

With a puppy, you pretty much need someone at home for the first few months. Fortunately, they are adorable, too, so there's a payoff.

Old dogs revert to puppyhood in many ways. They can't hold their bladder as well. Accidents occur. Multiple trips to the vet may be required for health problems.

Fortunately, by this time, they're one of the family so you just bite the bullet and clean up after them just like you would for Uncle Harry.

For the biggest payoff, get a long-lived dog so those golden years will be worth the effort on both ends.

Small breeds tend to live longer than large breeds. On the negative side, small breeds are often noisier and more frenetic than larger breeds.

If you are a control freak who wants to make the very best choice for your home, you may want to consider buying a purebred.

You can get great dogs at the pound. And you'll be doing society and nature a favor. But if you have specific requirements, look through the books and there will be a breed that meets those requirements.

My friend, Connie, for example, wanted to get a dog for her kid. Her husband did not want a dog. Repeat. No dog.

OK, she bargained, why don't you want a dog? Because he said, it will tie us down. It will chew up the house. It will terrorize the cats. It will mess in the house. It will shed. I'm allergic. It will bark. We'll have to walk it.

She and her daughter plunged into a couple of dog books and believe it or not, emerged with a couple of breeds that fit his specifications. Five years later, proud hubby loves to walk the little Shih Tzu around the neighborhood.

You can buy a calm dog; a hyper dog; a watchdog; a lap dog. You can buy a dog that doesn't shed and a dog that doesn't bark.

Whatever you want is out there. But realize that large dogs usually need lots of exercise. And any dog needs a good 20-minute walk at least once a day.

And unlike cats, you can't just run off for the weekend and leave them. Dogs are pack animals. They need people around. They also need to be walked and fed and watered.

Frequently.

Think about how much spare time and energy you have before you say yes to a dog.

## **High Maintenance**

In this category, you can put large birds, such as parrots and cockatoos, and any kind of exotic animal.

These pets usually require more attention; more expensive cages or habitats; specialized vet care.

And just try to find a pet sitter for them when you go on vacation.

These are not usually pets for children. Often they see children as something below them in the pecking order. And that is not good.

Now if you would like an exotic pet for yourself, that's one thing. But don't get one just for the kid.

Parrots and cockatoos make cool conversation pieces. They are fun and comical and easy to train to do tricks. They are very social birds that bond readily with people.

But they are also loud; they screech. They are messy and destructive.

If you ignore or neglect them, they become self destructive and pick their feathers out.

And they live 70 to 80 years. Just think of signing on for a 2-year-old who will never grow up. Ever.

## **Before You Agree to a Pet**

Before you ever give the nod to any pet, have a serious talk with your child.

Discuss the costs and responsibilities the pet entails. Discuss who's going to do what and when.

Discuss consequences.

Draw up a contract spelling out:

- What kind of care the pet will need. Set times each day for watering, feeding, etc.

Spell out how often cages will be cleaned and when.

- How the pet will affect his life and schedule
- When he will take care of the pet
- The costs associated with the pet
- How he can help offset costs

When Lyndsay decided she wanted a cat for her 10<sup>th</sup> birthday, we made an agreement with her. Your cat – you are responsible for her. We discussed what having a cat entails. Purring, snuggling – sure, there'd be some of that.

But there would also be feeding, watering and litter box patrol.

Most importantly, we made sure she realized the cat would indeed be hers. And hers alone. After all, I explained, with three kids I had more than enough living beings to look after. And Daddy works all day so he can't take care of a cat, either.

Did she understand what this birthday gift actually entailed? She gave it some thought. Later that afternoon she presented us with her signed "Kitty-Kat-Contract (until it dies)":

“I, Lyndsay Aronson, hereby promise that I will feed the cat, clean the litter box and love it and play with it and pet it forever. (Parents won’t do ANYTHING).”

Beneath were two “X”s where we were to sign. And short dotted line after each.

We signed.

The girl was serious about this, and clearly, she was ready.

Several weeks before her birthday, we visited the farmer’s market after church. Each week the local animal rescue league brings abused or abandoned cats and dogs in need of adoption to the market.

Lyndsay ran over, took one look at the Calico sister cats in a corner cage and announced she’d found the cat she wanted.

That’s when the first snag occurred: Seems the shelter felt the pair would be better off if kept together. Seems they’d been dumped on a busy street corner in a box together, survived that scary experience and a shared a cage for several weeks together.

We had a family meeting. Two cats?

Frankly, I wasn’t sure we were ready for one cat. But after a long discussion, we decided these sister cats had been through enough.

They came to our home together.

Today I can’t imagine life without Coco and Chloe, as Lyndsay has named her cats. They’re sweet, and Lyndsay takes excellent care of them.

Yes, we have missteps – she occasionally forgets to clean the litter box before she goes to bed – but she’ll rush to it when reminded of the oversight first thing the next morning.

I’ll let you in on a secret: My daughter actually believes we’d give the cats to her older brother if she didn’t take care of them. But she has truly accepted responsibility for them.

And she’s learning a wonderful lesson about caring for something that can’t care for itself. Or maybe she just wants to irritate her brother.

Either way, Mom and Dad are coming out the winners. We’re NOT cleaning the litter box.

## Truth and Consequences

When a child neglects a pet (instead of a litter box) have a consequence ready.

Maybe the other siblings can be paid to do it out of the delinquent child's allowance. Maybe TV privileges are lost for a week.

Maybe the kid has to do extra chores to compensate for Mom taking over the task. But there has to be consequences.

Try the Tom Sawyer fence approach. Make pet care look like fun. Make walking the dog or brushing the cat seem like a privilege that they have to earn.

This really does work in households with several siblings sharing an animal.

Instead of issuing threats or whining, help kids come up with solutions. Sometimes they cannot care for a pet because they have band practice or they're going to camp. Fill in or let them hire a sibling.

If siblings have their own pets, maybe they could switch off. Try to make it their problem, but do help them work out a solution.

And if their solution is you, help them figure out how they can make it up to you. Work it out like a trade of labor. Maybe they can wash the car for you later.

Do not make giving up the pet a consequence of not caring for it.

You are only teaching her that animals are dispensable. Do you want her to get rid of you later on when she loses interest?

Pets, once acquired, are part of the family unless someone develops an allergy or other medical condition or the dog starts biting.

This is a serious commitment for the whole family.

## Pet Diseases

One often-ignored aspect of owning a pet is that it can possibly transmit diseases to your child. These types of diseases are called zoonotic diseases.

Remember your mom always screeching “Wash your hands!” after you petted a stray dog or cat? Well, she was right.

But it’s not just the strays you have to worry about. All pets can potentially transmit diseases if you don’t take the proper precautions.

Usually, the only people who might be seriously affected are pregnant women, people with weakened immune systems or children under age five.

It is very unlikely that you will ever catch a disease from your pet.

To get a disease, you have to have very close contact with a pet or its feces or urine. Little children are most at risk, not just because of their size, but because they have fewer antibodies. They are most likely to kiss animals, eat their food or (ick) touch their droppings.

And then they are also the most likely to put their hands in their mouths or suck their thumbs, etc.

To make sure that no one gets sick follow these simple precautions:

1. Supervise kids under age 4 with pets.

One or the other could get hurt. (Puppies have sharp little teeth. And cats get really cranky when 3-year-olds try to ride them.)

2. Don’t let young children around a dog while it’s eating.
3. No child should walk a dog unattended – at least not out of the neighborhood. What if another dog attacks them? The child could be hurt.
4. Keep young kids with snacks away from dogs. They might lose a finger as well as the snack.
5. Have children wash their hands after handling an animal or its belongings.
6. Never let children eat food after a pet or kiss a pet on the mouth or nose.

## Less-Toxic Weapons for Winning the War Against Fleas

You've got cats or dogs – and now you've got fleas.

You've got kids, too. How do you get rid of the pests without harming the kids?

They're not only a nuisance, but their bites can cause irritation and even serious allergies in some people.

What can you do to beat the buggers? These less-toxic tricks will have your home itch-free in no time:

For your Pet:

- Comb constantly. Groom your cat or dog with a metal flea comb, available at pet stores. Focus your efforts on the neck and tail area. Keep a bowl of hot soapy water nearby to drown the captured critters (ruthless enemies call for ruthless treatment).
- Bath Dogs Daily. Until the infestation is under control, using shampoo or dog soap (insecticide not required). It's the best way to get a flea infestation on a larger animal in check. Take the comb into the bath for an extra measure of flea catching-and-killing.
- Launder washable pet bedding in hot water and bleach at least weekly.
- Think (and apply) topically. Topical flea-busting treatments such as fipronil and imidacloprid can be applied to an animal's skin in small amounts while wearing gloves. From there it spreads over the entire body of the pet and is effective for at least a month.

For Your Home:

- Treat carpets, pet bedding and other non-washable with less-toxic products.

Sprinkle diatomaceous earth (DE) on carpets, upholstered furniture and pet bedding. It has little toxicity to pets and people, but kills fleas handily by absorbing the waxy coating on their bodies, causing dehydration and death.

Wearing a dust mask and goggles, sprinkle a fine layer of DE on your home's infested surfaces.

You can blow DE into cracks and crevices, too. Other good less-toxic choices include borate-based carpet treatments and flea traps.

#### Preventing Future Fleas:

- Keep your pet indoors.
- Restrict your pets to a regular sleeping space so you can better focus your flea-busting efforts.
- Use washable pet bedding.

### Preventing Zoonotic Diseases

Here are some of the more common diseases that can be transmitted from pets to humans, and how to stop them.

Most are mild; some are serious.

- **Cat scratch fever (with apologies to Ted Nugent):**

This bacterial disease is spread by cat scratches and bites. It can cause fever, swollen lymph nodes, loss of appetite and general weakness. Kittens are more likely to carry it.

To prevent this, wash wounds with soap and water.

- **Campylobacter:**

Puppies sometimes carry this bacteria in their stools. It can cause diarrhea. More ick. (This is why we have pooper scoopers and bags.)

- **Cryptosporidium:**

This is a bacterial disease carried in the feces of horses, cats and dogs.

In humans, it can cause diarrhea, nausea and vomiting. Wash hands after handling animals. Take animals with diarrhea to the vet.

- **Leptospirosis:**

This is a bacteria in dog and cat urine that can cause flu like symptoms or more serious illnesses.

Wash your hands after handling pets and prevent pets from drinking contaminated water.

- **Mycobacterium:**

This is a bacteria found in fish and aquarium water.

Exposure can result in swollen lymph glands in kids or more serious illnesses for the immune compromised.

- **Ring worm:**

This is a fungal infection caught from furry critters.

- **Round worms:**

These worms are found in infected cat and dog feces. In humans, they can cause fever, cough, loss of appetite and congestion.

Never touch feces with bare hands. Period.

- **Salmonellosis:**

This bacteria passed through animal feces can cause fever, vomiting and diarrhea. You can also contact it by petting reptiles, snakes, turtles – even horses. Some 70,000 people get it each year just from handling reptiles.

Baby chicks and ducklings may also be infected. Never let kids under age 5 pet baby chicks and ducks. Wash hands thoroughly after handling pets or pet tanks or aquariums. Don't let kids kiss their pets.

- **Scabies:**

This is a skin disease caused by itch mites that burrow under skin. Take scratchy uncomfortable pets to the vet before these mites find a human home.

- **Toxoplasmosis:**

This is caused by a parasite found in animal feces. In most cases, you feel like you have the flu, but it can be serious for immune compromised people, pregnant women and small children.

You can get this by handling cat feces but also from eating raw meat or even gardening. It's easy to prevent by simply washing your hands after changing litter. Do not you're your cat raw meat and keep him inside so doesn't eat small animals.

## **Removing Pet Stains**

If your cat keeps missing the litter box, you don't have to live with the pungent reminders of accidents past.

Pet accident on carpet and upholstery can be removed, especially if you attack them while they're still fresh:

### **Pet Piddle**

Start by soaking up excess liquid with a white rag or paper towels. Blot on a solution of one-quarter tsp. mild liquid laundry detergent and one cup warm water.

Repeat until there is no more stain transferring to your towel or rag.

Next, blot with a solution of two tablespoons ammonia and one cup water. Rinse with warm water.

Repeat and blot dry.

Then blot the area with a solution of one cup white vinegar and two cups water. Rinse again.

Finally, cover the area with several layers of paper towels weighed down with a heavy nonfading object. Continue changing the paper towels until the carpet is dry.

### **Pet Poop**

Gently scoop up excess with a spoon or spatula. Deposit into a bag you can immediately take outside.

Blot with the ammonia solution above. Allow to soak for several minutes.

Blot and repeat until the stain is removed. Rinse with cold water.

Blot dry.

To remove lingering carpet odors, sprinkle baking soda on the spot. Let it sit overnight, then vacuum.

If you can't remove either stain, however, consider recovering the furniture item or replacing the carpet. This might also be a great time to consider the benefits of a good dog trainer.

## **Cleaning the Litter box**

Tools:

Box

Liner (great to cut down on weekly cleanings)

Scooper

Gloves

Bags

### **Daily**

Scoop lumps out of your litter box as many times a day as you have cats.

For example, we have two cats so Lyndsay scoops once in the morning and once before bed. Wearing gloves and disposing of the scoopables outside, of course.

### **Weekly**

Take the litter box outside.

Empty contents in garbage.

Using scraper, dislodge any lumps of wet litter remaining.

Fill with hot water; add a half-cup bleach. Allow to sit and disinfect at least 10 minutes.

Rinse thoroughly.

Dry with rags or allow to air dry.

Add fresh litter.

## Pet Rules

Decide on rules before the pet ever arrives. Here's a sample list.

1. Is he or she allowed in the house?
2. What rooms of the house?
3. Can it sleep on the bed?
4. Is it allowed on other furniture?
5. Where does it eat?
6. Can it ride along in the car?
7. Can the siblings play with it

## House Rules for Kids and Pets

- Be sure you or your child washes her hands after handling pets.
- Do not let children eat a pet's food.
- Do not allow kids to kiss pets on the mouth or on the nose – not even kittens and puppies that often are more prone to have diseases than their inoculated parents.
- Small children and pregnant women should not clean or touch litter boxes.
- Keep sandboxes covered when not in use so birds and kitties don't poop there.
- Keep your pets healthy and their vaccinations up to date.
- Do not roughhouse with animals to provoke bites or scratches.
- Keep pets indoors when not on a leash. Indoor pets are unlikely to be exposed to bacteria and diseases and less likely to pass them along to you.

- Always wear rubber gloves when coming in contact with animal excrement – whether changing litter box, doing pooper scooper duty or cleaning up accidents.
- Young kids and immune compromised people should not clean aquariums.

## **Freshness Unleashed**

A scented fabric softener sheet placed in an envelope under the sofa cushion or pillow will help eliminate dog and pet odors from Muffy's favorite napping spot.

## **Get Attached to Your Vacuum**

Got pets? Get attached to your vacuum's attachments. If dogs or cats are part of your family, regular (at least weekly) vacuuming of the ubiquitous hair on sofas, pillows and beds is a must.

Use attachments to get deep into the couch corners where cat and dog fur collects.

## **Final Tips for Pet-Oriented Parents**

### **What Age for What Pet?**

Suggestions from the ASPCA on what pets are appropriate for what ages.

Under 3 – no pet

3-5 – guinea pig

5-10 – mice, rats, fish

10-13 – dog, cat, rabbit

14-17 – birds, aquariums

### **Earn That Pet**

My friend, Mary, had a daughter, Leah, whose first sentence was "I want a dog."

Unfortunately the father did not. In fact he did not want a dog as strongly as the child yearned for one.

The little girl began have some behavior problems in the first grade.

The mom decided to reward good behavior rather than punish the bad (since the latter method was not working, anyway).

Mary brought out two pint-size jars – one empty and one full. The blue one was full of marbles. The clear one was empty.

Every time Leah did some unexpected, unsolicited kindness, chore or good deed, she was able to add a marble to the clear jar. Every time she was naughty or acted out at school, marbles were put back in the blue jar.

The agreement: When the clear jar was full of marbles and the blue jar was completely empty, she could have a dog.

Dad readily agreed to this plan since the kid could not behave for an hour let alone months. It seemed safe.

Indeed, for the first month, there were IOUs in the bottom of the clear jar. The kid was in debt.

But then, slowly, the marbles began to move over. And by summer, the little (now well-behaved) child was able to pick out her puppy.

It was a win-win situation. It took about eight months for Leah to earn her puppy, but by that time, she was in the habit of behaving well without reminders.

Although the child was young for the dog responsibility, Mom was an animal lover and did not mind helping her out.

And Dad? Pretty soon, he was seen walking the dog and even helping it up onto his bed at night. And they all lived happily ever after – really!

The moral of the story is: If there's a pet that you're going to eventually break down and let your kid have, anyway, why not make her earn it?

It will buy you time before the animal arrives, it will give the kid time to mature and the animal will be even more special when it shows up.

For more great tips and techniques, visit [Clean-Organized-Family-Home.com](http://Clean-Organized-Family-Home.com).