

Five Good 'Starter Pets' That Are Less Care-Intensive Than Cats and Dogs

Your child wants a pet, but is he ready for one? Ask these questions to decide. If you think he's not yet ready for the responsibility of caring for a dog or cat, one of these 'starter pets' would be perfect. Still, remember that the buck stops with you, so make sure you're committed too.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- If your child is asking for a pet, there are several things to consider in deciding what kind of animal would be best as a "starter pet"
- Smaller pets, for example, turtles or rats, require less time and attention from your child than a puppy or kitten
- Honestly assessing your youngster's maturity level is an important first step in determining if he or she is ready for the responsibility of pet ownership
- Even if you decide your child is more than ready for the responsibility of pet ownership, it's important to be personally committed to caring for any pet you bring into your home for its lifetime, in the event your child loses interest
- Almost every type of animal now has specialty rescue associations, so consider looking into providing a forever home to an unwanted pet first

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published December 19, 2015.

Many parents of young kids automatically assume a puppy or kitten is the natural choice for their child's first pet. But the fact is, puppies and kittens, and even adult dogs and cats, require a great deal more time and effort than other types of animal companions.

That's why it's often a good idea to start with a less attention-intensive pet to see how well your child handles the responsibility of caring for a living creature.

It's also important to give serious consideration to your youngster's maturity level, no matter her age. If she's reliable and responsible, follows directions well, has a generally calm disposition, and shows empathy, she's probably a good candidate to have a pet of her own.

However, if your child is often forgetful, careless, or extremely self-absorbed, she might not yet have the maturity or be responsible enough to care for a defenseless creature that will be entirely dependent on her.

Even if you decide your child is more than ready for the responsibility of pet ownership, it's important to be personally committed to caring for any pet you bring into your home for its lifetime, in the event your child loses interest (or in the case of long-lived animals, goes off to college and must leave the pet behind).

Five Good 'Starter Pets' for Kids

1. **Fish** — Fish are almost always easier and less expensive to feed and care for than other pets, however, they do require a proper environment and knowledgeable caretakers.

If you're a novice fish keeper, do some research with your child before selecting a particular species of fish. Start small, with a fish bowl or small aquarium and two or three hardy, low-maintenance varieties like goldfish. As your child's interest grows, you can upgrade to a bigger, more expensive, or unusual aquarium and more exotic varieties of fish.

2. **Rat** — Rats are very curious, intelligent animals and can make wonderful small first pets for children. They are easily tamed and relatively easy to care for, however, they do require a fair amount of attention and exercise outside their cages — ideally at least an hour a day.

Rats are social, so they do best as pairs. Same sex pairs or groups are best, and males usually get along, especially when they are introduced as youngsters or are littermates. As a general rule, males are larger and less lively than females; females tend to be more active and playful.

3. **Turtle** — The most popular pet turtle is the red-eared slider. These turtles grow to 8 to 10 inches in length, and are easy to maintain in a large aquarium. (For example, a 60-gallon tank is a good size habitat for two adult turtles.) When considering a red-eared slider as a child's first pet, it's important to note that they can live over 20 years.

This turtle species is healthy and does well when kept in a shallow-water, unfiltered aquarium. The aquarium water must be changed frequently, and the turtle must be fed in a separate container.

UV lights and basking sites in the aquarium are a must, as is a basking light that maintains a temperature of about 80 degrees F in the habitat. All reptiles can naturally harbor salmonella, so kids must practice good hygiene with this pet.

4. **Rabbit** — The neat thing about a pet rabbit is that just like a cat, dog, and many types of pet birds, a bunny will bond with your child the more he or she interacts with and handles him. Many rabbits know their humans by sight and sound, come when called, jump up into a lap when invited, and follow their owners around the house. Other bunny benefits:

- They're quiet and clean
- They have distinct personalities
- They fit easily into a vegan or vegetarian household
- They are long-lived (a well-cared for rabbit can live 12 years or more)

5. **Hamsters** — The most common pet hamster is the Syrian hamster, also known as the teddy bear hamster or golden hamster. Syrian hamsters are solitary and must live alone. Adult Syrian hamsters grow to about six inches in length and their average lifespan is 1.5 to 2 years.

When it comes to handling, hamsters don't mind being held, but they typically won't sit and cuddle. They are

quite busy little animals and always on the go. Your child will probably adore watching her hamster play in his habitat or a secure play area.

It's important to note that hamsters are awake at night and sleep during the day. They groom themselves, so they don't require much physical upkeep. Hamsters do, however, have continuously growing teeth, so they need a constant supply of appropriate food and toys to chew on.

Other Considerations for a Child's First Pet

- **Kids younger than five can't handle the responsibility of caring for a pet** — Toddlers and very young kids are much more likely to injure an animal, or risk being injured by a fearful or startled pet.

Giving a child a pet as a surprise, or insisting a youngster should have a pet of his own is discouraged. It's better for everyone involved, including the animal, if your child is eager for the responsibility of a pet and is prepared.

- **Always set pet caretaking expectations ahead of time** — Discuss with your child and other family members all house rules for the new pet and who will have responsibility for what. It's a good idea to write everything down and post it in a spot where your child can easily refer to it.

Feeding and interacting with the pet is the fun part of pet ownership, but there are many grubby and not-so-fun aspects of daily care that kids must be ready to take on as well.

- **Look for adoptable animals first** — Depending on the type of pet you and your child choose, look first at the shelters and rescue organizations in your area for an adoptable animal.

Almost every type of animal now has specialty rescue associations, so consider looking into providing a forever home to an unwanted pet first. Adopting a shelter pet will help your child understand the plight of homeless animals, as well as how terrific it feels to provide a forever home for a deserving pet.

Sources and References

[Reptiles Magazine](#)

[SmallAnimalChannel.com](#)
