

Incorporating Children in the Care of Pets

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Along with the happiness and fun pets bring to our lives comes the responsibility of providing a lifetime of care and well-being. Caring for a family pet should be a family job! Children can and should participate in the care of a family pet. Helping with the routine care of a family pet can enable children to become self-reliant and learn about responsibility. One way to make pet care an educational and fun family project is to set up a token economy. This can also help children learn to count, add, subtract, and the basics of making a budget.

The first step is to establish the minimum care needs of the pet. Children can help identify these basic needs, which include food, water, "poop patrol" and litter box or cage cleaning. After you've determined the pet's minimum needs, brainstorm a little more. Create a second list of the extra tasks that can be done to assist in the care of the pet (e.g., brushing, bathing, training, exercise).

Once you have determined the tasks required for the pet's care, you can set up your token economy. First, select some type of token (e.g., checkers, marbles, stickers). Children will earn tokens by participating in the pet's care. Parents and children should work together to assign a value to each task. Token values may be determined by the difficulty of the task or the time it takes to complete it. Changing the pet's water may be worth one token, but bathing the pet may be worth three.

Providing for basic needs (those tasks on the first list you created) is a responsibility that comes with owning a pet. This responsibility is the price of all the pleasure that the pet provides. Children should not earn tokens for providing basic care. Instead, they may earn tokens for tasks that go above and beyond basic care (the tasks from the second list). Occasionally we all slack in our duties. We may decide to play hooky from work to enjoy a day at the lake. However, we do this with the knowledge that we are making a choice and will have to deal with the consequence. Children need to learn this as well. If a child slacks off on "poop patrol" one day, she is fined the value of that task.

A weekly chart showing everyone's jobs can be hung on the refrigerator. This chart can be used to track completed jobs, as well as tokens earned or lost. Children should be in charge of keeping their own tokens. Lost tokens should not be replaced. On a specified day (e.g., once a month) children will use their tokens to "buy" privileges.

Privileges can include an extra half-hour before bedtime, extra TV time or anything that the child finds motivating. Each privilege should be assigned a value that fits its desirability. A day at the water park should cost considerably more than candy. Children can also be given the option of skipping a scheduled cash-in day in order to buy a bigger, less common privilege later.

Owning a pet is a joy, but it is also hard work. Children can derive self-worth and confidence from successfully caring for their pet, while learning about the responsibility involved in pet ownership. This benefits the entire family, including the pet!