

Benefits of Pets for Kids – The Essential Guide

We've had a love for pets ever since early man first trained wolves to obey commands. You won't find many wolves in family homes today, but dogs and cats are commonplace.



Unsurprisingly, young children are particularly fond of having their own pet.

This guide will look at the impact pets have on children, what it takes to own a pet, and will demonstrate how a pet is a healthy addition to any child's upbringing.

Pets in a Family Home:

The most recent statistics suggest there are as many as 11.5 Millions dogs and cats in households across South Africa. That number alone highlights the love we have for pets. Let's take a closer look at the impact of pets in the family home.

Common reasons to get a pet as a family:



With plenty of benefits to owning a pet – whether you're a child or an adult – it's no surprise so many people want to bring one into their home. But there are different motivations for buying a pet. Some of the most common include:

- **Companionship** – Single people and families alike look to animals to provide companionship. Unconditional love is rare in life, but it's surprisingly common among certain pets. This is particularly the case with dogs, who some scientists believe can

understand our emotions. Having a pet who's utterly devoted to you is appealing for many people.

- Entertainment – Pets shouldn't be welcomed into the home purely as a form of entertainment, but it's a natural by-product. Most people have, at some point, played with an animal and experienced joy.
- Benefiting your child – As we're going to discover throughout this guide, your child will benefit from the presence of a pet. Mental and physical health will both be improved, while life lessons will be learnt along the way.

Owning a pet can be a rewarding experience.

Finding a budget for a pet:

A pet is a major new addition to your life, so it's important you're able to cope with the initial and ongoing costs. The easiest way to make sure the pet you want is affordable is by breaking down the costs of your new family member over time.

Some of the common costs of pet ownership include:

1. Initial Adoption Fee – The upfront adoption cost you have to pay for a pet will vary. Adoption fees are calculated by the Animal Welfare Organisation you adopt from, based on the care that was given to the animal whilst in their kennels as well as the sterilization and vaccination of the animal.
2. Medical costs – Pets aren't automatically covered for medical expenses. Pet surgeries, vaccinations and even check-ups could cost a lot of money. A great way of planning for your pet's medical costs is to take out pet insurance. For a monthly fee your pet will be covered for illness and injury up to a specified amount. If you're undecided, consider if you'd be able to find the money to cover an unexpected trip to the vets?
3. Food – How much you need to feed your pet will vary depending on its size and breed. You should also be aware that some animals will have special dietary requirements – just like some people – which will cost more to provide.
4. Grooming – You'll likely associate grooming with owning a dog, but cats also need some care when it comes to looking after their coat. The difference being that you may wish to take a dog to a specialist groomer, but will probably be able to manage your cat's grooming at home. How regularly your pet needs grooming will depend on its hair length.
5. Equipment – Includes the likes of a lead, toys, a litter box, environmental enrichment etc.

Just as with humans, different animals will have various habits and requirements. For example, the annual cost of owning a dog will be more than a fish. Look into prices and decide if you've got the resources to cope with bringing an animal into your home.

The Key Benefits for Children:

Deciding to get a pet can have a series of benefits for a child. Let's explore some of the positives a child will experience if they regularly interact with a pet.

Mental and emotional health:

In an age where mental health is championed, it would be wrong to overlook this factor. Animals have a proven positive impact on a person's mental wellbeing. At a time when the development of a person's emotional capabilities is at its most impressionable (childhood), the addition of a pet can be beneficial.



- **Stress relief** – Pet therapy is an increasingly popular form of stress relief. People stroke, or interact with, an animal to reduce anxiety levels. This is caused by the body releasing endorphins after coming into contact with a loving pet. A stroking or patting motion has a therapeutic impact on a child (or adult), triggering this natural reaction. Endorphins are effectively the chemicals in our brains which make us happy. They naturally lower stress and anxiety. This could have a significantly positive impact on a child's mental strength over time.
- **Boosted self-esteem** – Self-confidence doesn't come naturally to everyone. But pets don't judge. Treat them well, and they'll be your friend for life. This is particularly helpful for kids who struggle to make friends. It isn't easy for everyone to start up a conversation with strangers. Having a pet who makes them feel appreciated and secure can improve independence and confidence.
- **Emotional maturity** – Understanding that some things will come before your own desires is an important lesson in maturity for children. While it doesn't need to be constantly hammered home, learning when to prioritise a pet's needs will help them grow into a responsible adult.

Physical wellbeing:

It's not just on a psychological level where pets can have a positive impact on your life. Physical wellbeing is also boosted when an animal is introduced into the family environment. This happens in different ways.

1. **More active lifestyle** – It goes without saying that owning a pet can encourage you to have a more active lifestyle. This is particularly true in the case of dogs, who need to be exercised to remain happy and healthy. A study found that children who have a dog get an additional 11 minutes of exercise a day compared to those who don't.

Allowing a child to go on regular walks, and encouraging them to clean up after an animal will have a positive impact on their daily exercise.

2. **Developing immunities** – Studies into childhood illnesses have suggested that living with a pet in the house from birth increases a child's immune system. It's believed this is the result of a pet bringing dirt into the family home. Babies and young children then adapt to the conditions, strengthening their immunity.

It's also suggested that allergies can be prevented if animals are introduced to a child at a young age. Coming into contact with pets in the early stages of life can give the body time to adjust and fight against the types of bacteria which cause allergic reactions.

Life lessons from owning a pet:

Children can also learn valuable lessons from caring for a pet, including:

- **Responsibility** – We've already touched on it briefly, but owning a pet boosts responsibility levels. Aside from putting an animal first, it also teaches kids to actively think about their decisions – and stick to them. Caring for a pet forces a child to step up and fulfil duties and roles they might not have to otherwise.

Activities such as feeding, cleaning up after or walking a pet are great ways for children to learn about responsibility. It makes them accountable for an animal's wellbeing, and gives them obligations to fulfil. It's a healthy type of pressure.

- **Socialising** – If a child suffers from social anxiety, a pet can give them gentle encouragement. This is a condition which often develops in adolescent years, and is hard to combat. Having a pet which forces someone to get out and potentially interact with others is a good way of supporting progress. A child can tackle their demons head-on, with the comfort blanket of having their pet alongside them.

On occasion, strangers will stop someone with a dog to talk to them about it. Times like these are the perfect chance to brush up on social skills. They're also a handy reminder that most people are actually quite friendly – a concern children suffering from social anxiety worry about. Of course, ensure an adult is always supervising and teach children to beware of strangers if out alone.

- **Future Parenthood** – It's a long way off yet for a child, but taking care of a pet teaches a very basic form of parenting. Traits which they'll need during this stage of their life will become deep-rooted in these early years. While it won't be obvious to them at the time, an experience with a pet can be drawn upon when dealing with kids of their own.

This includes:

- Sticking to a rough routine
- Feeding and cleaning a pet
- Putting their pet's needs first
- Keeping them medically healthy and cleaning up after they've made a mess

It might not seem like it at the time, but this could make a huge difference on their approach to parenthood in the future.

- **Basic life values** – Kids can also pick up important values from their pets. The most notable of these is empathy. Learning to care for a pet which depends heavily on them, teaches a child how important it is to understand the emotions of others.

Having a rough understanding of what their pet is going through will help to develop a sense of caring. This can be applied across all areas of life.

For most children with pets, these factors will stand out as some of the primary benefits. While individual lessons might be learnt from an animal's personality, these are the kinds of things which every child picks up from pet ownership.

Special Needs Children and Pets:

Things are a little different when it comes to children with special needs. There are some great benefits to bringing a pet into the family, particularly for a child with learning or behavioural difficulties.

Autism friendly pets:

Children with autism can benefit from pets in much the same way as other kids, such as:

- Heightening social abilities
- Reducing stress
- Developing a healthier heart
- Improving their immune system

Experts also believe animals can be used to aid the behaviour and learning capabilities of autistic children.

Some of the most widespread issues face by a child with autism include:

- **Self-harm** – Autistic children will often lash out at themselves. This includes anything from using an object to cause damage, to striking themselves (usually in the head) with their own hands. This behaviour can be calmed by specialist animals (often dogs) who are trained to deal with the situation. The animals will reach out and try to stop the hands of an autistic child. Their goal is to stop them striking themselves, and even offer support in the form of a cuddle.
- **Inability to gauge emotion** – Part of autism is an inability to understand what or how others think. This can often be challenging for anyone, but autism makes it almost impossible. Pets won't teach empathy to autistic children in quite the same way as they do to other kids, but they do help to make subtle changes and further a limited understanding.
- **Non-verbal communication** – Some children with autism find it impossible to communicate verbally with others. As such, a pet is the perfect companion. They don't have to rely on words, so it provides a child the chance to interact on a level they're more familiar and comfortable with.

Autistic children have significantly varying traits when it comes to their behaviours and needs. As such, it's impossible to suggest that one type of animal is right or wrong for every child.

This will depend largely on the kind of sensory stimulation a child is comfortable with:

- **Able to accept sensory stimulation** – Children who fall into this bracket can adapt well to any kind of animal which is pleasant to touch. This includes the likes of dogs, cats, rabbits, hamsters and guinea pigs.
- **Unable to accept sensory stimulation** – For kids who aren't keen on touching, there are alternatives. Tortoises, turtles, snakes and some breeds of lizards stand out as the perfect options. These creatures don't require much human contact, and are relatively slow and relaxed.

Giving someone on the autism spectrum this kind of outlet can help them to naturally integrate with others.

Animals to help with physical impairments:

Some children have disabilities which make it difficult for them to do things many find simple. Trained animals can aid these kids in many ways. More often than not, this comes in the form of dogs.

These service animals will be able to perform a number of actions which make things considerably easier for someone with a physical impairment. Support could include:

- Picking up items which have fallen on the floor
- Opening doors and cabinets
- Helping someone to stand or sit down

- Retrieving items for their owner (in an emergency or otherwise)
- Pushing buttons
- Barking for help in an emergency when nobody else is around

Pets are also able to work alongside people with visual or hearing disabilities. We've all seen guide dogs caring for people out on the streets, but sometimes forget these animals are also close friends.

For young children especially service animals are important. They'll serve as a crucial stepping stone between their own world and the one around them. Primarily, they'll ensure people with an impairment aren't left feeling trapped or isolated.

*This article was brought to you by [Direct Line Pet Insurance](#)