



Mott Poll Report

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Family Pets: Pros and Cons for Kids

Pets can be an important part of a family and have a big impact on a child. The decision to have or not have a pet can involve a lot of factors including timing, the kind of pet, and who will take responsibility for it. The C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health asked a national sample of parents of children age 5-18 about reasons to have or not have a family pet.

Two-thirds of parents (69%) report their family currently has a pet, and 16% say they had one in the past. The most common pets are dogs (76%), cats (41%), fish, birds, and reptiles (24%), and small mammals such as rabbits or guinea pigs (9%).

Many factors go into deciding whether or not to have a family pet. Parents with pets endorse a number of reasons for children having a pet. The top reason rated as very important for children to have a pet is for fun and companionship (63%). Other reasons include that a pet would teach their child responsibility (57%), and parents themselves having a pet growing up and enjoying it (39%). Three in ten parents (30%) say it is very important to have a pet to provide protection for the family, and that their child wants a pet (31%).

In families that do not have pets, parents' top reasons rated as very important not to have a pet include: hassle of owning a pet (62%), family member with pet allergies (55%), cost of owning a pet (48%), that their child would not be responsible (43%), and having a pet would not be safe for their child (39%).

Parents indicate that responsibility for the care of a family pet can increase as a child gets older. The most common age at which parents say it is appropriate for a child to assume responsibility is 8 years for feeding the pet, 9 years for washing/brushing or cleaning up after the pet, and 10 years for walking or exercising the pet. Among parents with a family pet, 56% say their child always takes care of pet responsibilities, while 40% said their child sometimes is responsible.

About 1 in 6 parents (18%) say they would allow their child to receive a pet as a gift; 42% say no and 40% say they might allow it. Fifteen percent of parents have given their child a pet as a gift.

Family pets: Why or why not?

% of parents reporting very important reason for or against child having a pet

Parents with pets say:

Companionship	63%
Teaches responsibility	57%
I had a pet growing up and enjoyed it	39%
Protection	30%

Parents without pets say:

Hassle	62%
Family member has allergies	55%
Cost	48%
Child won't be responsible	43%



Source: C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health, 2019

Report Highlights

Parents' top reasons for having a family pet are fun/companionship and teaching children responsibility.

Parents' top reasons against having a family pet are hassle, allergies, and cost.

Only 1 in 6 parents would allow their child to receive a pet as a gift.

Data Source & Methods

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by Ipsos Public Affairs, LLC (Ipsos) for C.S. Mott Children's Hospital. The survey was administered in August 2019 to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults who were parents of at least one child age 0-18 years living in their household (n=2,004). Adults were selected from Ipsos's web-enabled KnowledgePanel® that closely resembles the U.S. population. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the Census Bureau. The survey completion rate was 60% among panel members contacted to participate. This report is based on responses from 1,712 parents who had at least one child age 5-18 years. The margin of error for results presented in this report is ±2 to 6 percentage points.

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Implications

Most families at some point go through the process of deciding whether or not to get a pet. This Mott Poll found that there are a lot of issues parents find important in evaluating if and when a pet is right for their child.

Parents endorsed many potential advantages to their child in having a pet. Among these are the benefits of teaching their child a sense of responsibility. Caring for a pet can help kids learn the importance of being dependable in taking care of another living being. Pets can teach children valuable life lessons like reliability, trust, compassion, respect and patience.

However, the decision to have a pet needs to be weighed carefully. When thinking of which pet to add, parents should pick one that fits the lifestyle of the family. A fish or turtle will require less playtime than a cat or dog. If the family travels a lot, an animal that can be left at home with minimal care would be a good choice. Families that want to include a pet in active play or long walks might find a dog to be a perfect fit. If a family member has allergies, parents should choose pets that have minimal hair or dander.

Before getting a family pet, parents will want to consider the extent to which they expect children to have responsibility for the pet's care. An especially important consideration is what happens when the "newness" wears off or a puppy/kitten gets older. Some children may lose interest and not want to care for the pet over time.

Before bringing home a new pet, parents should discuss with their child the specifics of what their responsibilities will be. Pets require food, grooming, and exercise; the pet's cage, pen or other environment requires regular cleaning and upkeep. No matter how committed their child may seem at the time of getting a pet, parents will have to consider themselves to be the backup plan if their child cannot or does not continue to care for the pet over time.

It is also important for parents to have realistic expectations regarding how much children at different ages can reasonably be expected to contribute to the care of a pet. Most experts believe that children over 5 years old can begin to take on developmentally appropriate responsibilities with regard to the care of a pet, with parental supervision. Children under the age of 10 should not be expected to take care of a pet completely on their own.

Safety was mentioned by parents in this Mott Poll as both a reason for and against having a family pet. On one hand, dogs may deter intruders by barking, and often can be trained to be protective of children in the family. However, some dogs can be aggressive with little warning, resulting in injuries and even death to children. Parents who are considering a dog as a family pet may want to consult with a veterinarian or other expert to find out which breeds are appropriate for children. For the safety of both the child and the pet, children under the age of 4 should be supervised with pets at all times.

Only 1 in 6 parents in this Mott Poll would allow their child to receive a pet as a gift. There is a long tradition of giving pets as gifts for special occasions, but animal shelters are filled with "former pets" where a child either lost interest or did not have the ability to care for it responsibly. Individuals contemplating giving a pet as a gift to a child should be sure to talk with parents first, to make sure the parents agree that the child is ready for the responsibility of having a pet, and that the parent is willing to help. Parents may want to steer the gift-giver toward a pet whose cost and burden of care fits with the family's lifestyle. Surprising a child with the gift of a pet is unfair to the animal, the child, and the parents.