

PETS FOR CHILDREN

Choosing the right pet for a child can be a tricky business for the uninitiated and unwary parent. We know that taking care of animals can be an excellent training ground for children — teaching them responsibility, care for others and the facts of life. But sometimes what parents think children may want and what the children themselves actually do want might be quite different things.

Children often want a living cuddly toy, and it is vital to explain to the prospective child pet-owner that this is not what animals are. Animals have their own needs and desires, and only occasionally do these correspond with a child's need to have a pet to cuddle or play with whenever they want.

Furry friends they might become, but not without some degree of investment. This is both in terms of providing the right ecology to meet the animal's needs, and giving it the right training so that it does more of what you want and less of what you don't want.

Bear in mind that children under the age of about five or six will not understand the responsibility required to care for any kind of pet. And so a golden rule for parents is: **No child should ever be given a pet that the parent is not prepared to look after themselves!**

The information that follows is designed to provide basic information to help you choose the right small animal for your family situation:

	PROS	CONS
HAMSTERS/ GERBILS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🐾 Small pets which don't need much space in the house 🐾 Inexpensive to acquire or keep 🐾 Can be easily tamed and handled when kept from a baby 🐾 Interesting to watch if given a rich ecology 🐾 Easy to keep 🐾 Non-predatory 🐾 Easy to transfer for someone else to look after during times family is away 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🐾 Nocturnal and need to be undisturbed during the day 🐾 Can nip 🐾 Need to live alone to prevent breeding 🐾 An exercise wheel it can be noisy at night when the pet is most active 🐾 Short-lived 🐾 As they are small, they need very gentle handling to prevent injury 🐾 Vulnerable to some other pets, eg. cats and dogs
GUINEA PIGS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🐾 Small pets yet big enough for young children to handle (when supervised) 🐾 Tame and cuddly when regularly handled gently from young 🐾 Inexpensive to keep after initial cost of housing and run 🐾 Friendly and interactive intelligent pets 🐾 Non-predatory 🐾 Can live in pairs (brothers) or larger groups of females 🐾 Can live indoors (although need outside grazing in suitable weather) or in a well-sheltered outdoor hutch 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🐾 Shy/nervous animals and therefore need regular and gentle handling 🐾 Can get lonely so best to obtain two 🐾 Do not like the damp 🐾 Vulnerable to predators, eg. foxes, some dogs and cats 🐾 Children can be allergic to the hay or even sometimes to the guinea pigs' fur 🐾 Long-haired breeds need regular gentle grooming to keep coat in good condition 🐾 Can occasionally bite
RABBITS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🐾 Full of character if given a good ecology 🐾 Cuddly and friendly when given regular kind attention 🐾 Very quiet pets 🐾 Are easily house-trained 🐾 Can live outside or inside (in a rabbit-proof home) 🐾 Reasonably inexpensive to keep after the initial cost of housing 🐾 Come in different shapes and sizes, from dwarfs to very large ones 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🐾 Need lots of freedom and exercise 🐾 Can chew things in the house 🐾 Need regular handling to maintain friendliness 🐾 Are not very easy to pick up by children 🐾 Can kick quite hard 🐾 Are easily frightened 🐾 Vulnerable to predators eg, foxes and some dogs/cats 🐾 Males cannot be housed together 🐾 Need annual vaccination and so can be expensive
RATS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🐾 Sociable and easy to tame 🐾 Clean 🐾 Can be trained 🐾 Intelligent and interesting pets 🐾 Friendly 🐾 Inexpensive to keep after initial costs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🐾 Need a large and interesting wire or glass cage which can be expensive 🐾 Need supervised exercise 🐾 Vulnerable to other pets, eg. dogs and cats 🐾 Can become lonely so it is best to keep two
BUDGIES 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🐾 Bright and interesting to interact with 🐾 Amusing with their antics and chatter 🐾 Several can be housed together in a large enclosure 🐾 Inexpensive to keep after initial cost of cage or aviary 🐾 Small and reasonably easy to handle when necessary 🐾 Can be tamed and trained 🐾 Can be moved to another location for holidays etc 🐾 Can live indoors or outside in secure aviary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🐾 Need a large and secure cage or aviary 🐾 Need regular access to supervised freedom within a secure room 🐾 Vulnerable to cats and some dogs 🐾 Occasionally people can be sensitive to feather dust 🐾 Some can bite 🐾 Cage or aviary will need cleaning at least once a day
FERRETS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🐾 Interesting animals that provide a lot of entertainment for the family 🐾 Can be handled well if trained from young 🐾 Can be kept in indoor or outdoor cages 🐾 Can be taken for walks on a lead 🐾 Live longer than many other small animals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🐾 Have distinctive odour (particularly males) 🐾 Need larger enclosures which takes up space 🐾 Need more food and so are more expensive to keep 🐾 Need lots of ecological enrichment for stimulation 🐾 Can bite if insufficiently trained when young 🐾 Females should be spayed to prevent disease

OTHER PETS

The list overleaf is, of course, far from exhaustive. There are many other small animals that make great pets — from fish to tortoises and even spiders.

Cats and dogs remain the nation's firm favourites as pets, and they make excellent companion animals for the whole family. Information with advice on taking on a dog can be found in the EASE leaflet 'Can You Be a Dog's Best Friend?', available from our website.

EASE also offers other educational material, including 12 leaflets in the care of specific animals and a book for children entitled 'Caring for your Pet', all available via our website.

The Environmental Animal Sanctuary and Education (EASE) is a registered charity (no. 1089160) which promotes aspects of the human/companion animal relationship. Our services include the provision of a Preparing for Pet Loss programme as well as education in animal welfare. For more information about our work, visit our website on

www.ease-animals.org.uk

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SMALL ANIMAL GUIDE



CHOOSING THE RIGHT SMALL ANIMAL FOR YOUR CHILD