

Skill-Building Opportunities

Caring for Pets

Question: My son wants a family pet. I'm resisting because I fear that the bulk of the responsibility in caring for the pet will fall on me. Any advice on choosing a pet that my son can reasonably contribute to its care?

Jack Shonkoff of Harvard University says, "The drive to master our environment is a basic human characteristic from the beginning—from birth."

Offer your child an opportunity to become a master by building strategies to prepare and plan for a pet, and by promoting the life skill of Self-Directed, Engaged Learning.

Self-Directed, Engaged Learning: It is through learning that we can realize our potential. As the world changes, so can we, for as long as we live and as long as we learn.

1

Talk with your child about why he wants a pet.

Your son's desire for a pet may be motivated by a social reason, such as his friends have dogs and he'd like one, too. If it's an emotional reason, he may think a pet would make a good companion. Helping your son understand why he wants a pet will help you understand why it's important to him, and also what kind of pet would best meet his needs and your needs, too.

2

Do research together.

Once you have a list of possible pets you agree would be good options, give your child an assignment to learn as much as he can about these pets.

Help him outline the questions he needs to answer in advance—this will help him to be a self-directed learner. For example, he will need to know the kind of environment and care that different pets need. This project could involve research using the internet, trips to the library for books on animals, and interviews with pet owners, pet store employees and/or animal breeders.

He could then organize and present the information he's gathered to the rest of the family, and share ideas about whether or not to proceed with getting a pet.

3

Ask for a proposal and a plan for accountability.

The plan and proposal can include expenses, time and specific tasks. Ask your child to determine what help he'll from you. Also include a discussion about what happens if everyone doesn't fulfill their roles in the care and perhaps training of the pet.

4

Make sure you want to be on the pet care team.

The promotion of life skills requires us, as adults, to step back and reflect on our own thoughts and feelings.

No matter how much preparation you and your child complete, you will have ultimate responsibility for the pet (for example, if the pet becomes ill), so make sure you're willing to be a member of the team. If the decision is made to bring a pet into the family, a plan for pet care responsibilities should be developed, with a plan for accountability for following through on assigned duties.