



# CHOOSING A PET

When my eight-year-old nephew brought home a hamster he lovingly named "Whiskers," he smiled from ear to ear—that was until his mother reminded him of the deal they struck in the pet store. He could have the hamster as long as he cleaned its cage and fed it every day.

Teaching responsibility is one of the hardest jobs of parenting. Zana Ellis, Manager of the Toronto Humane Society, has seen many parents use their children's fondness for furry friends as a way of introducing the concept, but is quick to point out the flaws in this strategy. "Families often give pocket pets (guinea pigs and hamsters) to kids and they tell them that it's going to be their responsibility...and it never is," says Ellis.

The addition of another living creature into the household affects everyone who lives in it. From cage cleaning to daily socialization, pets require frequent veterinary visits, grooming and feeding, all of which fall on the heavily burdened wallets of the adults in the household. "I would never say this pet is for the child, ever. It's always for 'the family' because everybody is going to end up helping to care for that animal," says Ellis, stressing that even though the chore chart indicates Junior is responsible for cleaning the cat's litter box or putting food in the dog's dish, Mom or Dad always have to double check that the task is done.

A pet can make a wonderful addition to a family, but choosing the right companion can be as complicated as finding a mate.





# FOR YOUR FAMILY

BY LISA EVANS

## Be realistic about how your family operates.

Are you an active family that loves to spend time together outdoors, or are you constantly running between work, school, swimming lessons and hockey tournaments? How much time you can devote will help determine the right pet for your family.

## Anticipate lifestyle changes.

Dogs and cats can live up to 20 years, long after your nine-year-old has reached adulthood, and hopefully, learned responsibility. Consider where you will be in your life at that point and whether you will still want to be a pet owner.

## Travelling without pets.

If your family loves to travel, consider what that will mean for your pet when you leave for a humans-only vacation to the Caribbean. While it's fairly simple to find a kennel for your dog, these can be expensive and need to be built into the family's

travel budget. Asking a neighbour or family member to dog or cat-sit is a good option, but other pets such as rabbits and reptiles don't lend themselves well to sitters who lack experience caring for these types of animals.

## Are you allergic?

"Allergies are one of the most common reasons why animals are given up," says Ellis. Even if you aren't allergic to the animal, allergies to hay or shavings, often used as food and bedding for smaller animals, are very common and are important to investigate before bringing a pet into the home.

To find out if you or your child is allergic, ask your family doctor for an allergy test, or Ellis recommends to simply "go to your grandma's house or a friend's with a pet and get your kids to pet them and rub their hands in their faces and see what happens over a period of time."



# WHICH PET IS RIGHT FOR YOUR FAMILY?

## DOGS

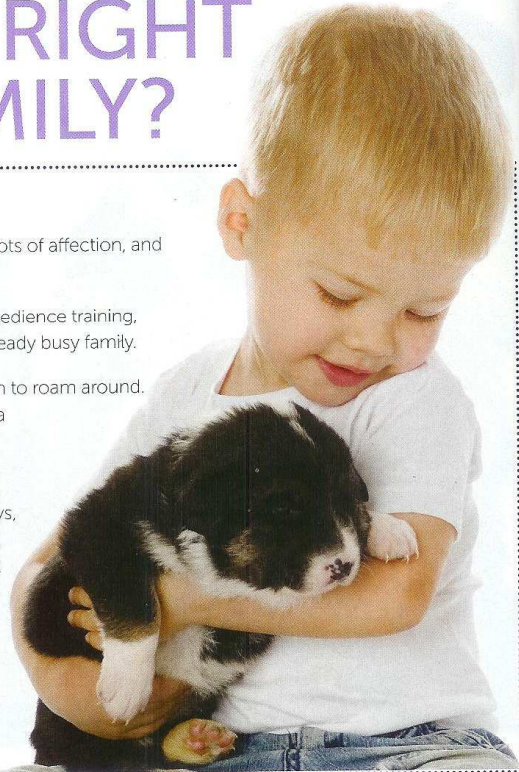
**Pros** – Dogs are playful companions. They crave stimulation, give lots of affection, and love spending time outdoors.

**Cons** – Dogs require three walks per day, daily socialization and obedience training, which can be expensive and a serious time commitment for an already busy family.

**Special Considerations** – Dogs, especially large breeds, need room to roam around. Long haired breeds require frequent grooming, and all dogs need a bath every month.

**Cost** – Yearly vaccinations and heartworm prevention is expensive. The first year of dog ownership can cost up to \$1,700 including toys, leashes and treats, and families should budget \$800 per additional year for medical costs. If you live in Toronto, a dog license will cost \$20 to \$60 per year. Dog walkers, doggie daycare and kennels are additional costs you should consider.

**Final word** – Dogs are high-maintenance pets that are well suited for energetic families with lots of time to spend together at home or outdoors at the park.



## CATS

**Pros** – Cats are known for their independence. While they're happy to stay home alone for long hours, they will still greet you at the door and keep you company, enjoying quality lap time while you watch TV.

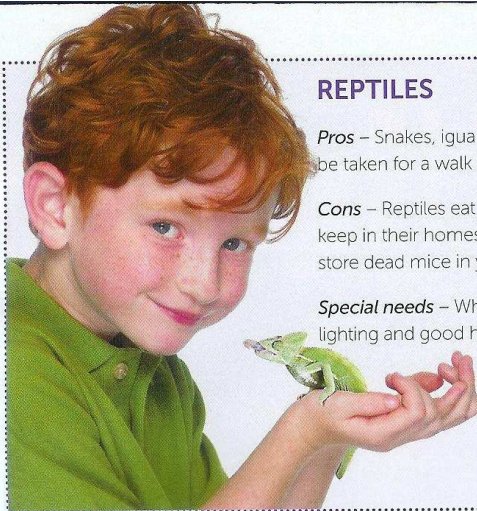
**Cons** – Cats tend to have a regal attitude when it comes to their human companions. They are affectionate only when they want to be and aren't as playful as dogs.

**Special Considerations** – While they don't need to be taken for daily walks, you do need to scoop their litter box, keep their fur groomed and their nails clipped.

**Cost** – The first year of cat ownership can cost up to \$1,200 and families should budget around \$500 each year thereafter for medical costs. If you live in Toronto, a cat license will cost \$15 to \$50 per year.

**Final word** – Cats don't require as much work as dogs, but still provide affection (when they want to). They're best for families who aren't able to devote as much time to pet maintenance but still have lots of love to give to a furry friend.





## REPTILES

**Pros** – Snakes, iguanas, geckos and lizards are lower maintenance pets. They don't have to be taken for a walk every day and can be left alone in their habitat all day long.

**Cons** – Reptiles eat live meal worms, crickets and snakes eat mice, which owners need to keep in their homes. If you can't stand bringing live mice into your home, you may have to store dead mice in your freezer.

**Special needs** – While reptiles are a low-maintenance pet, they require expensive UV lighting and good humidity.

**Cost** – Exotic veterinarians can charge around \$90 for a health exam.

**Final word** – Know what you're getting into. These pets might be lower-maintenance but their special dietary requirements may be a turn-off to squeamish moms.

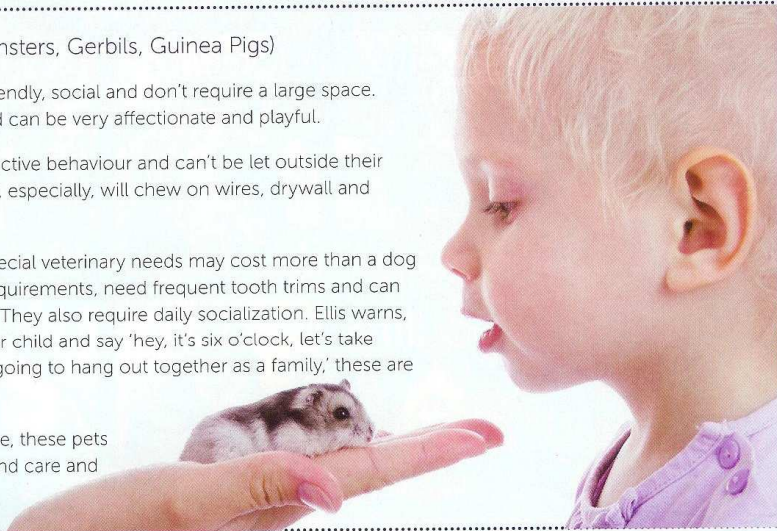
## SMALL PETS (Rabbits, Hamsters, Gerbils, Guinea Pigs)

**Pros** – These small animals are friendly, social and don't require a large space. They crave human interaction and can be very affectionate and playful.

**Cons** – They can have very destructive behaviour and can't be let outside their cage without supervision. Rabbits, especially, will chew on wires, drywall and anything within reach.

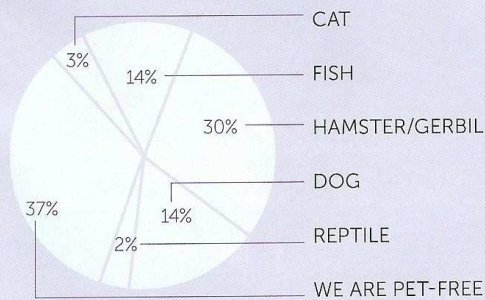
**Special considerations** – Their special veterinary needs may cost more than a dog or cat. They have strict dietary requirements, need frequent tooth trims and can develop serious dental problems. They also require daily socialization. Ellis warns, "unless you can be there with your child and say 'hey, it's six o'clock, let's take Biscuit out of his cage and we're going to hang out together as a family,' these are not the right pets for you."

**Final word** – Although small in size, these pets require a great deal of attention and care and can be quite costly.



## We polled you...

What was the first pet you introduced to your home?



## 10 things to consider and discuss BEFORE getting a pet:

1. How big is our living space?
2. How big is our yard?
3. Who will be responsible for each new chore?
4. How active are we prepared to be?
5. How often do we intend to go away?
6. How much money are we prepared to spend?
7. Where do we see ourselves in 10 to 20 years?
8. Are there any allergies in our family?
9. How tolerant are we to messes and smells?
10. Are we prepared to deal with the loss of a pet?