

animal appreciation

more than just a pet

There is a lot that children can learn about animals. There is also a lot they can learn from them. TAMILYN VINCENT explores the many benefits that spending time with animals can offer.

Zoey, our mini dachshund is defleating my son, causing fits of giggles. He buries his hand up his sleeve, driving Zoey crazy and making her nibble even harder. Reggie, our other sausage, tries to nuzzle his way in, but he's just looking for a scratch.

Laughter and enjoyment aren't the only benefits of having two dogs share our home. My son throws balls for them, but they never relinquish their prize. They've never seen the point in giving back the ball. So to reclaim it, we have to play chase. And, of course, the dogs are useful at mealtimes. My son has quickly learnt that they'll happily eat anything he doesn't want, including tomatoes.

animal aid

Spending time with animals has many benefits for children. As animals don't judge, children are often likely to talk to pets, improving self-confidence. Dr Marleanna le Roux, chair of Pets as Therapy in Cape Town, says this quality in animals can improve reading skills as children who are struggling with reading can practise with their dog.

There are health benefits as well. Walking or running with dogs means more exercise. Interacting with pets



can also reduce blood pressure and decrease stress. A dog's ability to help with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder has seen trauma dogs being used in crisis situations like school shootings. And because children often respond well to animals, they are used in a variety of therapy treatments.

Children can learn about animals from books, or wildlife films. Through animal interactions, children can learn empathy and responsibility, while learning about these animals. While this is apparent with pets, it also becomes clear when children visit animal shelters or wildlife sanctuaries. There is also knowledge to be gained from spending time at certain zoos and aquariums.

four-legged friends

Owning a pet can develop a nurturing instinct in children, says Dr Zee Akoojee, a Cape Town vet. Children develop a caring attitude and self-confidence from looking after pets. Children also need to learn the importance of caring for something without receiving anything in return, says Akoojee. Some of the responsibilities of having a pet include making sure there is always fresh water, cleaning up after the pet, feeding it and taking it for walks. So, before getting a pet, make sure your children are ready.

Teach them that a pet is for life, advises Akcojee, and can't be ignored when it's no longer cute. "The entire family should be on board," says Akcojee. Work together to find a pet that suits your family's lifestyle, considering the space you have, the time and energy you can dedicate to the pet and remembering the basic costs and vet's bills.

Children who don't have their own dog could walk dogs for friends or neighbours, letting them interact with animals and exercise, while teaching them responsibility. Another option for families with pets is to visit retirement villages or hospitals. Families can sign up to organisations like Pets as Therapy, which takes dogs, and a few cats, to visit these places. "When you see the faces of the people you're visiting, you know you've done something good," says Le Roux. The pets like the attention too. However, Le Roux says that not all dogs like getting patted, and not all people want to be visited, so children should go with an adult and only take their dog if it has the right temperament.

shelters and sanctuaries

Children should learn about caring for people, animals and the environment, so they develop a caring, socially minded attitude that will stay with them, says Janet Legemate, education officer at Durban's Kloof and Highway SPCA. Visiting animal shelters or wildlife sanctuaries teaches children about the needs of animals. Children also learn about conservation and what it means to give back.

Parents should show children what shelters need to care for animals and together think of ways to help, suggests Legemate. Depending on the shelter, children need to be a certain age to volunteer, but there are other ways to help. "Bring dog biscuits to feed the dogs," says Legemate, or buy a bag of food. Look out for educational opportunities at wildlife sanctuaries and shelters or visit them as a family.

animal books for children

Toddlers

How Do Dinosaurs Love Their Dogs? by Jane Yolen – T-Rexes model both good and bad pet-care behaviours. (Blue Sky Press, 2010)

Tails Are Not For Pulling by Elizabeth Verdick – The book is about showing children how to love

pets gently. (Free Spirit Publishing, 2005)

Peek-a-Boo Pets by Francesca Ferri – Play peek-a-boo with pets. (Barron's Educational Series, 2009)

Preschoolers

A Home for Dixie by Emma Jackson – A story about an adopted puppy. (Harper Collins, 2008)

Mr King's Incredible Journey by David du Plessis – An introduction to a range of creatures from South Africa's coast. (Random House Struik, 2011)

Early graders

Dear Greenpeace by Simon James – Emily writes to Greenpeace for advice on how to care for a whale in her pond. (Walker Books, 2008)

My First Book of Southern African Mammals by Peter Appis – An introduction to a cross-section of mammals. (Random House Struik, 2000)

Preteens and teens

The Underneath by Kathi Appelt – A calico cat, about to have kittens, befriends a hound. (Simon and Schuster, 2008)

White Dolphin by Gill Lewis – Kara and Felix have to work together to save a dolphin calf, and the reef in the bay of their home town. (Oxford University Press, 2012)

aquariums, zoos and game reserves

My son was terrified the first time we went to see dolphins. He thought they might jump out of the water and land on him. When he realised what they were he was enthralled, as are thousands of other children who pass through the education programme at Durban's Seaworld, which teaches children about marine life and conservation. At the National Zoological Gardens of South Africa, children can see reptiles, birds and mammals, and become a junior nature conservator. They can also see animals in environments that simulate their natural habitats, a move encouraged by the environment enrichment programme followed at this facility.

Visiting zoos and aquariums gives children the chance to meet animals up close, says Angeliné Schwan, communications officer at the National Zoological Gardens.

Many zoos and aquariums treat animals with care and run conservation, rescue and rehabilitation programmes. But these types of facilities can come under criticism for keeping animals in captivity, or mistreating them. As parents, it's important to be aware of these issues and to consider and question what's in the animals' best interests. Schwan recommends that before visiting a facility, check that they are a member of PAAZAB (African Association of Zoos and Aquaria; visit zoosafrika.com), which requires members to comply with certain standards. "Word of mouth is a good way to find out about the best places to visit," says Schwan. At game reserves, animals are given free rein.

No matter how you choose to introduce your children to animals, they will benefit from the interaction. When my son was born, and the dogs still didn't know what he was, we looked forward to the day they would be friends. I think they are all on their way to being lifelong buddies, especially if they keep eating his vegetables for him. 