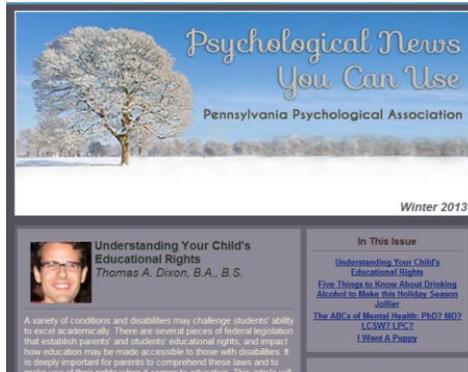


# I Want a Puppy!

by Risë VanFleet, PhD, RPT-S, CDBC



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**I Want a Puppy!**  
*Risë VanFleet, Ph.D.*

"I want a puppy!" "Let's adopt a cat!" Children are drawn to animals and often beg their parents to get a pet. Parents might eventually decide to get a pet, perhaps liking the idea themselves or thinking this will be a good way to teach responsibility. They might yield to their children's pleas, either happily or with resignation, as long as their children promise to "do all the chores and take full responsibility." Is this a good idea?

Childhood experiences with pets offer many benefits, but the scenario described above often results in family arguments, disappointment, and ultimately, one of the parents providing most of the pet care. There are several considerations that help this process go better.

## ***Benefits of Pets for Children***

Children often benefit from pets in the home. Research has shown that children experience the following benefits:

- reduced anxiety, lowered blood pressure
- more exercise
- stronger immune systems
- companionship; opportunity to learn about relationships
- improved empathy and care-giving
- self-regulation
- outlet for playfulness
- social lubricant effects (easing of social interactions)

- development of competencies

Of course, problems sometimes occur between children and pets, or between parents and children about the pets. This is not a decision for parents to take lightly!

### ***Parents' Opinions Matter, Too***

Parents who dislike animals or who have never taken care of a pet need to educate themselves about the many aspects of pet ownership: i.e., training, exercise, considerable attention, feeding, veterinary visits, and supervision of child-pet interactions. There is much to learn and to do throughout the life of a pet. Adding a dog or cat to the family needs almost the same consideration as adding another child! If parents don't have the time, money, or interest in having a pet themselves, it's probably not the best choice. It's a long-term commitment, too. Re-homing a pet when things "don't work out" can be very upsetting for children and stressful for the animals. Furthermore, doing so provides a poor model for children in terms of responsibility, commitment, and empathy. Parents will want to make sure that they are prepared for the animal to become a family member for his/her lifetime. Colleen Pelar's excellent book, *Living with Kids & Dogs...Without Losing Your Mind*, is highly recommended for parents anticipating bringing a pet into the family.

### ***Holiday Pets***

The holiday season is a popular time for families to surprise their children with a new pet. The excitement that children express is the stuff of wonderful photos and videos. Even so, the holidays generally are not the best time for families to add pets to the household. First, it is a busy season, with many family gatherings, trips, shopping, or cooking. There is little time left to supervise a pet and the children. Second, if one is getting a puppy that needs to be house-trained, winter is not an ideal time for accomplishing that. In general, it is better to surprise children at other times of the year unless the family is able to provide all the attention a new pet needs.

### ***Keeping Everyone Safe***

While children and animals enjoy playing together, accidents happen. Children get scratched, pets get dropped, animals get stressed, and sometimes bites cause facial disfigurement and trauma. Most of these problems can be prevented with parental supervision. Children need to learn safe ways to interact with pets, and parents need to be vigilant that interactions remain enjoyable for both child and animal. There are a number of excellent resources on this topic: [www.doggonesafe.com](http://www.doggonesafe.com); another book by Colleen Pelar about supervising children, *Kids & Dogs*; a blog by Dr. Sophia Yin at <http://drsophiayin.com/blog/entry/kids-and-dogs-how-kids-should-and-should-not-interact-with-dogs>; and a wonderful recent blog by Madeline Clark Gabriel--<http://www.dogsandbabieslearning.com/2013/09/03/how-to-be-a-kid-dogs-feel-safe-with/>.

### ***Learn About Animal Body Language***

One of the most interesting and useful things for families with pets to do is to learn about their animal's body language. Animals are communicating all the time, but we often fail to see their messages. Learning about body language can help families reduce stress on their pets, prevent injuries, and strengthen children's empathy for others. Two excellent family-friendly resources on this are *What Is My Dog Saying?* and, *What Is My Cat Saying?* which are both available from <http://www.diamondsintheruff.com>.

### ***Make Training a Family Affair***

Just as it is with children, consistency from the human family is important for good pet behavior. In particular, dogs do not come with pre-installed good behavior, even though we might wish for that! Training is very important for a happy adjustment for everyone in the family. It's important that all family members learn how to

train dogs, for example. Classes and in-home training are available in most communities. It is extremely important that only positive training methods be used for training dogs, in part because it increases dogs' motivation to do what their humans want, and also because it provides the best model of caring behavior for children. Things to be avoided are choke chains, prong collars, or electronic collars (sometimes called "stim" collars or "e-collars"). They are things of the past. Methods that promote dominating one's pets are outdated and potentially dangerous for children. Approaches that rely on positive reinforcement offer the best options for families. Furthermore, positive training can be used to teach tricks to dogs, and these are often quite popular with children. There is an article about selecting the right type of dog trainer at [http://play-therapy.com/playfulpooch/images\\_resources/FindDogTrainer.pdf](http://play-therapy.com/playfulpooch/images_resources/FindDogTrainer.pdf)

### ***Turn "Chores" into Fun***

Most adults have grown up with the notion that taking care of pets is a chore. Typically when we think of anything as a chore, we are not particularly motivated to do it. The way that parents present pet care to children can make a big difference in their motivation and cooperation. It can be quite fun to listen to a dog slurp his/her supper, watch the things a dog sniffs on a walk, or groom a pet in a manner that the animal truly enjoys.

Parents might want to present pet care as a privilege rather than as a chore. Instead of saying, "You have to feed the dog tonight." a parent might use a lighter tone of voice to say, "You get to feed the dog tonight! Let's see how long it takes him to eat tonight!" Redefining pet chores as enjoyable activities can enhance children's cooperation.

### ***Summary***

Pets can be wonderful companions for children and families. They offer many benefits and countless hours of fun and laughter. They require considerable care and commitment, and so the decision to add a pet requires much thought. Once acquired, however, the right amount of parental guidance and supervision, with reasonable sharing of pet care tasks, can help everyone live happily with the new family member!

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