

# Life Lessons Through Pets

## "Pets As Teachers"

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Families choose to have pets for many reasons and one key reason is to teach kids a sense of responsibility. Young people with pets not only have the opportunity to learn more about themselves but also the world: how to empathize, to understand and to view the world from a vastly different perspective.

Children also learn the importance of taking care of themselves through pets. Rebecca Reynolds Weil, an occupational therapist and executive director of the Animals As Intermediaries program says she teaches children why it is important to take care of a pet, brush his teeth and keep him clean. When they understand the importance, Weil turns the focus on the children themselves. If brushing a dog's teeth is important for his health, then naturally it is important for the child's well being.

Pets in the home and outside the home help accomplish these goals. On the emotional level, pets can teach children many things. Below is a list from Petplace.com:

**Communication:** Children learn the subtle cues their pets give them to indicate their feelings. They can later apply this lesson to human interaction because they are more attuned to watching for body posture.

**Empathy:** Children often become curious about the emotions their pets feel. This curiosity will extend itself to others. "Animals offer an avenue for children to explore their curiosity," Weil explains. "For a child, curiosity can lead to hope and to greater engagement with the world around them."

**Nurturing skills:** If properly supervised by adults, a child learns how to take care of another living being, and take pleasure in keeping the pet healthy and happy.

**Confidence:** Children go through life under constant evaluation. They are rated by their behavior, grades and athletic performance. This is especially true of middle school children. Pets have no such expectations; they're delighted that the child is with them. "Pets give children the sense of unconditional acceptance," Weil says. "No judging or rating is involved."

**Resilience to change:** Children who undergo traumatic experiences often cope better when they have a pet to confide in. "Loneliness is very dangerous to children," Weil says. "Having an animal companion can make them feel a part of something."

This doesn't necessarily mean that all children are ready for pet ownership. Parents should first make sure their child desires a pet before rushing out to get one. Together, they should decide what type of pet is best. Moreover, don't assume your child will take care of the dog. The ultimate responsibility usually falls on the parent, not the kid, to make sure the pet is healthy.

If a child is interested in Pet Sitting as a way to earn spending money, be sure he or she has a solid understanding of the responsibility that comes with pet sitting. As a parent and as a mentor you can add more and more lessons. Don't just let pet sitting be another job, let it be a lesson in life!

*Please visit [PetPlace.com](http://PetPlace.com) and [AAI-Nature.org](http://AAI-Nature.org) for some wonderful information on pets and people.*