

Kids, Dogs, & Responsibility

The kids have been clamoring for a dog for years. Now that your youngest is in elementary school, you are thinking the time may be right, but you're worried about how much work adding a dog to the family will be.

By elementary-school age, kids can be a great help in caring for the family dog, but it's important to remember that the ultimate responsibility for the pet always falls on an adult's shoulders. Be certain that *you* want a dog before you commit.

Feeding the dog is a fun task. An adult should figure out exactly how much the dog should be eating at each meal. Purchase a measuring scoop and clearly mark it to show how much food the child should give the dog. Without clear guidance, kids will typically overfeed the dog, which not only isn't healthy, but it can also lead to housetraining accidents. No one wants that.

Teach your dog to sit and stay while your child scoops the food and puts down the bowl. Initially you may need to hold onto the dog's collar to ensure that he doesn't charge forward in enthusiasm, but he'll quickly learn that your child will not set the bowl down unless the dog remains sitting. This is a great chance to use real-life rewards and consequences for the dog and to explain to your child that this works with people too, when she does as you ask, good things happen for her too.

If your dog enjoys being brushed, have the kids do that job. You can either have them collect the loose hair into a bag to be disposed or put it in a bush or tree for birds to use when making nests. Many children enjoy giving the fur to the birds as much as the actual task of brushing the dog. Do not ask your children to trim the dog's toenails; many dogs are very sensitive about their feet.

Taking the dog for a walk is best shared as a parent/child activity. Kids under 12 are not usually equipped to deal with all the surprises that could pop up during a walk, like squirrels and cats rushing by, strangers approaching to pet the dog, other dogs barking in their yards, or startling noises (such as sirens or power tools).

Dogs can bring you a lot of joy, but it's always wise to think carefully before adding one to your family.

Credit: Colleen Pelar, CPDT, is the author of *Living with Kids and Dogs . . . Without Losing Your Mind*. For additional information about safe interactions between kids and dogs, please visit www.LIVINGwithKIDSandDOGS.com.