

Where to Start

Pets can be great! Who else licks your face, chirps happily, or purrs in your lap? A pet can make you feel good and can calm you down when you're upset. And caring for a pet can help you learn about kindness and responsibility.

There are all sorts of pets. Some take a lot of time and attention and need a lot of space. Others can fit in a corner and don't need much care at all. Some live just a year or two. Others may still be alive when you leave home for good! Some may be happy to stay in a cage—others may mess on your carpets and scratch your couch.

So, before your family rushes out to get a pet, why not sit down and talk? Ask your parents how they feel about it. The pet you want has to be one that they want too. After all, a parent needs to be the one in charge of pet care and willing to take up the slack if necessary.

Here are some things to do before making a decision:

- ✓ Talk to people who have a pet like the one you want. Ask them what they like and don't like about it. Find out what's fun and what's tough about having this pet. Check out how much time, money, space, and hard work the pet takes.
- ✓ Read some pet books or go online to learn more.
- ✓ Talk to a vet who treats the kind of pet you're thinking about getting.
- ✓ Check to make sure nobody in the family is allergic to pets or to pet bedding.
- ✓ Study the charts at right. (These are, of course, just the opinions or recommendations of *Ranger Rick*.)
- ✓ If you decide to get a pet, figure out how to divide the chores among family members.

Even if you don't end up with a pet, you can have fun reading about the possibilities!

DOGS



GOOD: Can become a best friend and a playmate. Fun to cuddle, pet, and run around with. Comes in many varieties and sizes. Can live from 8 to 16 years, depending on size and breed.

BAD: Takes a lot of time and needs to be trained. Some may not like kids. Needs supervision around young kids. May shed and have a doggy odor. May bark or bite. May pee or poop on the floor, dig in the garden, or chew up your shoes or other stuff.

TIME: An hour or two a day. Needs lots of exercise: at least three walks a day or playtime in a fenced area. Puppies need to be housebroken and trained. All dogs need time to be played with, fed, and groomed regularly.

MONEY: Depends. Cost of purebred dog is \$500 to \$1,000. Crate, bed, leash, collar, and toys are about \$250. Spaying or neutering and vaccinations (shots), both a must, are \$150 to \$500. Yearly cost is \$300 to more than \$1,000, depending on how much dog eats and vet bills.

★ Think about getting a dog from a shelter or from a breed-rescue group. It's lower in cost and saves a pet's life. Many mixed breeds are healthier than many purebreds. But shelter and breed-rescue dogs may come with some behavior problems that take extra training and patience to correct.

SPACE: At least enough room for a bed and crate plus room to walk around and sprawl. A fenced yard or a place to walk the dog. Many apartments and condos don't allow dogs.

FINAL WORD: If you have energy, time, and space and are serious about wanting to train, care for, and love a dog over many years, this may be the pet for you. If thinking about getting a purebred dog, check out the pros and cons of each breed: See *Good Dog, Bad Dog: Dog Training Made Easy*, by Monceci Siegal and Matthew Margolis (Henry Holt, 1991). Then find a responsible breeder. Avoid large kennels and pet shops. Think twice before bringing a puppy into a house with very young kids. **TTT, \$\$\$**

CATS

GOOD: Small size. Curious, playful, and often affectionate. Fairly easy to take care of. Housebreaks itself with litter box. Adult cat doesn't need as much attention as a dog and can be left alone during the day. Can live 14-20 years.

BAD: Sheds. Many people allergic to cats. May not like kids. May scratch furniture and scratch or bite people. May not use litter box if sick or if its routine changes. Young kids need to be supervised around cats.

TIME: About half an hour to an hour a day: scooping out litter box and feeding (twice a day usually), grooming, and playing with cat. Kittens need more attention than adults.

MONEY: A purebred cat costs \$100-\$500. Many adults and kittens are free. Spaying or neutering, a

must, is \$50 to \$275. Vaccinations (shots) are \$50 or more. Yearly cost is about \$350, plus any unexpected vet bills.

★ Think about getting a cat from a shelter or rescue group. You may have to pay a small fee, but this often lowers spaying or neutering costs. Adopting saves a pet's life.

SPACE: Big enough for at least one litter box and places to snooze and play and watch the world outside. OK in small apartment. Best if kept inside for cat's own safety and for protection of birds and other small creatures.

FINAL WORD: Some cats are friendly people-lovers that like being held or sitting on laps; others are shy and don't want to be cuddled. Still, most are affectionate and intelligent. **TT, \$\$\$**



BIRDS



Cockatiels and Parakeets

GOOD: Small, easy to care for and tame, lively, colorful. Males may learn to talk. These birds are curious, playful and like to be cuddled. Bred in captivity and not taken from the wild. Live an average of 4 to 7 years.

BAD: Floor under cage can get messy. Because birds are small and delicate, they can get hurt when squeezed. Cockatiels can be noisy, and their feathers are dusty or powdery. Young kids need to be supervised around birds. Many vets suggest regular wing clipping so birds don't fly off. People can get sick from breathing in droppings of sick birds. Need to get new bird tested by vet.

TIME: About 30 minutes or so for daily chores, playtime, and attention.

MONEY: Parakeet costs \$20 or more; cockatiel is \$100 to \$150. Equipment is \$50 to \$250. Yearly cost is \$50 to \$100, plus any vet bills.

SPACE: Room for a cage at least 3 feet long and 2 feet wide (height not as important). NOTE: Avoid putting cage in drafty spot or in kitchen—fumes from coated pans can kill a bird. Smoke from fireplace and cigarettes is harmful too.

FINAL WORD: These birds make good first pets. Try to buy a bird that's been hand-fed when young. (Go to a breeder, not a pet store, if possible.) NOTE: Not all of them are great talkers; don't get one expecting you can teach it to talk. **TT, \$**

KEY

- ★ Best Bet
- TTT = Takes lots of time
- TT = Takes some time
- T = Takes just a little time
- \$\$\$ = Very expensive (more than \$250 per year to keep)
- \$ = Expensive (\$150-\$250 per year)
- \$ = Not too expensive (less than \$150 per year)

FISH



GOOD: Beautiful, and restful to watch. Easy to care for once aquarium is set up. Don't shed or mess up your house. Most freshwater kinds are not taken from the wild. (Don't buy saltwater fish—these are almost always taken from the wild. They're also more expensive and more difficult to care for.)

BAD: Can't be cuddled or played with. Live 2-10 years. Can die unexpectedly. Aquarium needs regular attention.

TIME: An hour or so for setting up aquarium. Half an hour once every few weeks to clean it. Only a few minutes a day for feeding.

MONEY: Most fish cost \$1 to \$5 each. Aquarium and other equipment is \$150 to \$250. Yearly cost is \$25 and up.

★ After buying aquarium and filter, this is perhaps the cheapest pet to keep.

SPACE: Room for 20- to 30-gallon aquarium. (Smaller size not recommended.)

FINAL WORD: Low-stress and easy. But learn all about aquarium set-up, maintenance, and fish-care first. **T, \$**

RODENTS

Mice, Rats, Hamsters, Guinea Pigs, Gerbils

GOOD: Don't need a lot of space. Playful, friendly, and cute. Many are easily tamed. Pet rats can be taught to do tricks and to play games with you.

BAD: Need to be handled gently. Young kids need to be supervised around them. Most live only 2 years or so (most guinea pigs, 4 to 5 years). Some, such as mice, can be smelly. Some, such as hamsters, are active mostly at night.

TIME: About 10 minutes to an hour a day for feeding, changing water and bedding, and playtime. Another half an hour every week to scrub cage.

MONEY: Rodents cost up to \$25 or so. Cage and other equipment cost \$100. Yearly cost is \$50 to \$100, plus any vet bills.

SPACE: Large enough for a cage. At least 3 feet by 2 feet; larger if you have more than one rodent.

FINAL WORD: A good pet if you don't have much room but want something furry to hold. Just don't expect it to live long. Ask your vet what type of bedding to use. **TT, \$**

RABBITS



GOOD: Active and playful, easy to tame. Come in many sizes and colors. Most are friendly and can be litter-box trained. Enjoy sitting beside you. Not taken from the wild. Live 6-10 years indoors.

BAD: Often don't like being picked up, held, and cuddled. Shed a lot. Need a few hours of supervised

exercise outside of cage daily. Need to be spayed or neutered. May bite, scratch, or kick if scared. Need to be kept away from heat.

FINAL WORD: Not recommended for kids under age 7. **TTT, \$\$**

OTHER BIRDS



Lovebirds

GOOD: Intelligent, colorful, affectionate, will bond with owner, can be taught to talk and to do tricks. Not taken from wild. Live 10 years.

BAD: Have powerful bites. Like to chatter. Natural paper-shredders. If you have a pair, they may become aggressive with humans.

FINAL WORD: Not recommended for kids.

Canaries & Zebra Finches

GOOD: Lively. Some canaries are singers. Easy to care for.

BAD: Don't like being handled or cuddled. Can bite and get stressed if

picked up. Finches need companion finches and live only 2 to 3 years.

Cockatoos & Other Large Parrots

GOOD: Intelligent and affectionate. Good talkers.

BAD: Parrots may bite hard and be unpredictable. Are often very noisy. Some large parrots may be taken illegally from the wild. Parrots may live 50 years or more—longer than most people want to keep them. Often cockatoos and many other parrots demand attention. Large ones cost a lot.

FINAL WORD: Do not buy!

FERRETS

GOOD: Curious, intelligent, friendly, playful. Can be litter-box trained. Live 6-10 years.

BAD: Unpredictable—may bite when they're surprised or frightened. Also, they're escape artists and are quick to

leave the house or hide, so need lots of supervision. Tend to get cancer and other diseases. Very smelly. Illegal in some states.

FINAL WORD: Not recommended.



REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

Snakes, Frogs, Toads, Tortoises, Turtles, Iguanas and Other Lizards

BAD: Lots are taken from the wild, often illegally. Some carry germs that can make people sick. Some should be handled very little or not at all. Often hard to care for properly. Many don't survive long in captivity.

FINAL WORD: Do not buy!



Rangers: Many species (kinds) of animals are taken from the wild and sold as pets—which is often against the law. Some species have become rare or even endangered because of this "pet trade." If you buy only the animals we recommend here, you won't be part of the pet trade problem. —Ranger Rick

INSECTS & OTHER "FOUND" WILD ANIMALS

GOOD: It's OK to catch and keep a cricket, grasshopper, praying mantis, or other harmless insect you might find. Put it in a jar with holes punched in the top. Do not leave jar in sun, and be sure to let your pet go the next day.

BAD: Birds, squirrels, raccoons, turtles, and other animals that you might find are not OK to keep. It may be against the law to keep these animals. Some can easily be harmed by your handling them. And you could be harmed as well.

FINAL WORD: Leave wild animals in the wild! 🐾

