



## FEATURE

# *How young is too young for a family pet?*

**Parents reveal the age they believe kids can have a family pet, with only 1 in 4 saying it's safe to have a pet at any age**

Pet ownership rates in Australia are among the highest in the world, with two-thirds (61 per cent) of Australian households owning an animal.<sup>1</sup> Around two thirds of dog and cat owners refer to their pet as a member of the family,<sup>2</sup> but how many parents feel it's safe to have their newborn, toddler or primary-school aged child around their 'fur baby'? New research reveals only one in four parents believe newborns are perfectly safe around cats or dogs, however large.

Online insurance comparison service comparethemarket.com.au commissioned a survey of an independent, nationally representative panel of 1002 Australian parents<sup>3</sup> to find out at what age they think is appropriate for their children to have a pet (both cats and dogs). On top of this, parents were questioned whether the size of the pet matters, and what would be the reasons for not allowing kids to have pets at an earlier age.

### **Newborns**

Interestingly, only a quarter of parents (25 per cent) think it is safe to have a pet with a newborn baby. Furthermore, when it came to the size of the dog in particular, this didn't seem to alter their views. Twenty-eight (28) per cent of respondents think it is safe to own a small family dog with a newborn, an equal 25 per cent agree in the case of a medium-sized dog, and 24 per cent said having a large family dog wouldn't be an issue. A quarter (25 per cent) were also comfortable owning a cat with a newborn baby.

While it's not recommended that young children are left unattended with pets, there are benefits to having a furry friend around the house with a newborn. A child who gains exposure to pets during infancy may develop a sturdier immune system and a lower chance of allergies.<sup>4</sup>

### **Babies up to age 1**

It was also found that more than a third of parents (34 per cent) are comfortable bringing a pet into the family when a baby is younger than one.

When it comes to canines, as long as it is small in size, 38 per cent of parents think it's safe when the child is younger than one. This, compared

with 35 per cent if it's a medium-sized dog, and 31 per cent when it comes to large dogs. Meanwhile, 36 per cent of parents think it's safe for a cat to join the household when a baby is under one.



Pets can be more than just companions, they can provide a soothing presence and non-judgmental support for children too. This is particularly the case when animals are used as part of a treatment plan to help children develop communication skills, along with medical, developmental and emotional disorders.<sup>5</sup>

## Primary - school aged children

Nearly a third of parents (30%) believe children need to be older than five before having a pet in the house. Forty-four per cent of parents think this in relation to introducing a large family dog, 31% in relation to a medium-sized dog, and 22% for a small dog. On top of this, 21% think children need to be five years of age or older to introduce a cat safely into the home.



Regardless of age, children who have four-legged friends are found to benefit in various ways, such as gaining greater self-esteem, better social skills and are less likely to experience loneliness.<sup>6</sup> So much so that the NSW Government has implemented three programs – Living Safely with Pets, Living Safely with Dogs, and We Are Family <sup>7</sup>– in primary schools to teach children how to be responsible pet owners and ensure children and pets can live harmoniously together.<sup>8</sup>

It's important for parents to teach kids how to behave appropriately around pets once they are old enough to interact with them independently, for the safety of both parties. Kids should also be taught to recognise the signs of when their pet is unhappy or unwell, and how to practice good hygiene with animals too.

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## Reasons why parents don't introduce pets to younger children

Respondents were also asked the reasons why they would not allow children to have pets at an earlier age and presented four scenarios: the pet might harm the child, the child might harm the pet, not wanting the added responsibility of looking after a pet, and not liking pets in general. The most common reason, chosen by more than half (54 per cent) of parents was that the pet might harm their child, followed by 40 per cent who were concerned the child might harm the pet. Knowing the task of looking after the pet would rest on their hands, 34 per cent of parents said they didn't want the extra responsibility.

A further quarter (25 per cent) of parents said they think it's safe for their children to have a pet at any age, while a mere six (6) per cent of respondents don't like pets in general.

The responsibility of owning a pet also comes with rising vet bills, an expense that Aussies are forking out for more than ever. Our national veterinary expenditure increased by \$414 million since 2016 – hitting \$2.6 billion in 2019.<sup>9</sup> Last year, the average annual household spend on veterinary services for dogs hit \$470, with 84 per cent of dog owners saying they had taken a trip to the vet in the past 12 months.<sup>10</sup>

Check-ups and vaccinations are among the most common reasons we visit the vet,<sup>11</sup> starting from around \$80 and up to \$90.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, puppy vaccinations can cost anywhere between \$170-250.<sup>13</sup> The rates of microchipping and desexing have also increased over time, with 86 per cent of dogs and cats now microchipped, and 81 per cent of canines desexed.<sup>14</sup>

Comparethemarket.com.au spokesperson Claire Rosenberg says: "It's common for parents to be hesitant about bringing a pet into the home around young children, as kids and animals are both notoriously unpredictable! However, being prepared and doing your research around the most suitable pet for your situation is important – taking into

account the personality and size of the dog or cat you choose. With pets often viewed as part of the family, looking after their health and protecting them from harm could prove costly if something were to happen. Households may want to consider getting pet insurance for peace of mind.

### Case study – Erin, parent to a 6-year old daughter and pug

Erin and her husband introduced their pet pug, Blaze, into the family when their daughter Avery was just three years old. Having grown up with dogs themselves, they wanted Avery to have the same positive experiences they had. Erin intentionally chose a smaller breed as Avery was sometimes frightened by larger dogs.

While it took around a month to adjust to the new four-legged family member, Avery now refers to Blaze as her brother, reads books to him regularly and even plays dress-ups with him. Erin admits they would have introduced a dog earlier if it wasn't for the added responsibility, alongside juggling work and taking care of their first-born toddler.

Now, Blaze is very much a part of the family and travels interstate on holidays too. Blaze is even having a party thrown for his third birthday next month, with party hats included!

### Cost of common veterinary procedures without pet insurance<sup>15</sup>

Veterinary Procedure	Cost of treatment for dogs	Cost of treatment for cats
Annual vaccinations and veterinary check	\$90	From \$80
Puppy / kitten vaccinations	\$170 - \$250	\$170-\$200
Desexing	\$200 - \$500 <sup>16</sup>	\$115 - \$300 (male or female)
Microchipping	\$60 - \$80	\$60
Flea and worming treatment, and heartworm prevention (the first year)	\$120 - \$300	\$100
Annual flea and worming treatment (ongoing)	\$120	\$100 - \$150

### Costs associated with pet ownership - average annual household spend<sup>17</sup>

Product or service	Cost for dogs	Cost for cats
Boarding / minding	\$108	\$96
Clipping / grooming	\$154	\$45
Training / behaviour / therapy	\$70	\$36
Pet healthcare products	\$224	\$147
Alternative healthcare treatment	\$57	\$44
Annual flea and worming treatment (ongoing)	\$147	\$69

### References

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16. Depending on age, gender and size