

A GOOD TEACHER

Let the family cat help your kids learn about responsibility.

By Patricia L. Fry

Having a cat or two in your household can mean more to your child than just companionship. When children interact with pets, they learn valuable lessons in selflessness, as well as the opportunity to learn respect and patience. Encouraging children to care for their family pets is an excellent way to teach them a sense of responsibility.

Karen Lee Stevens, founder of All for Animals and creator of the Compassion for Critters program that she presents at elementary schools in Santa Barbara, Calif., supports the concept of children caring for their pets but warns, "Even with the best of intentions, young kids shouldn't be 100 percent responsible for an animal's care. Parents need to set an example and show children the proper ways to pet, hold, feed and groom the cat, but [the parents] also should know that they ultimately will be responsible for its well-being."

Feline behaviorist Mieshelle Nagelschneider agrees. As associate of the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants in Portland, Ore., she says, "A parent must make the commitment, prior to a purchase, to care for the cat in case the child does not end up fulfilling his or her responsibilities." Nagelschneider adds, "Parents should be aware of their child's responsibility level before purchasing a live animal."

At what age can a child start taking on the care of a cat? Most experts agree that even a toddler can help, as long as he or she is properly supervised. And it's important for all family members to know what to expect when they decide to bring a cat into the home.

It also is important that the tasks are age-appropriate. Here are some guidelines:

****Get the October 2007 issue of CAT FANCY to read the full article.****