Children & Reptiles: What to Expect If You're Thinking About Getting Your Child a Reptile

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While reptiles are not suitable pets for children, that doesn't mean that reptiles can't fit into your household at all. Many older children can help to take care of a reptile or at least appreciate what unique and rewarding pets they can be. The following information will help to prepare you for what owning a reptile as a family pet will entail and what to expect.

Responsibility and Commitment

Reptiles can live ten or even twenty or more years depending on the species you are keeping. It is highly likely that they will outlive your child's childhood, and then the decision must be made whether the reptile will go with your child or remain a family pet. It's important that you prepare yourself for the possibility that the reptile will be your commitment regardless of how old your child is. According to the Federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, children under 5 years of age should avoid contact with reptiles because of the risk of *Salmonella.*

Reptiles also have very specific habitat requirements and dietary needs that must be met to keep them healthy. Daily duties include, but are not limited to:

- Preparing food (often live insects or pre-killed prey animals)
- Changing water
- Spot cleaning the habitat
- Monitoring temperature, humidity, and lighting

Additional tasks include monitoring your reptile for proper shedding, health problems, and annual veterinary examinations.

Cost

Reptiles themselves are usually not expensive animals - they can cost as little as $5 or $10. However, the supplies you will need to properly house, feed, and otherwise care for them must be taken into consideration too.

Supplies you will need to purchase as a new reptile owner include:

- Terrarium or aquarium
- Furnishings (hiding spots, branches, rocks, and other accessories)

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- Substrate
- Lighting equipment
- Heating and temperature monitoring equipment
- Cleaning supplies
- Food
- Housing for the food, if feeding feeder insects

You will also have to pay for a veterinary visit soon after you bring the reptile home to make sure that your new pet is healthy. Depending on veterinary costs in the area and whether or not there are any health issues that need to be handled, the cost of this can vary.

There are ongoing costs associated with reptile ownership as well. You will need to purchase substrate, food, and cleaning supplies regularly. Light bulbs will need to be replaced every six to twelve months. You will need to take your reptile to the veterinarian at least once a year for an annual exam.

In addition to these costs, electricity requirements need to be considered. Almost all reptiles will need heating and lighting equipment to maintain proper housing conditions. How much electricity is needed will depend on how elaborate a setup your reptile requires. Tropical and desert species will cost more than those species that are native to more temperate climates.

Proper Habitat Setup and Maintenance

This is definitely an area in which adult supervision is needed. Reptiles have very specific habitat needs, which, if they are not met, can cause serious health problems and significantly shorten their life span. All reptiles have what is called a "preferred optimum temperature range," or POTR, that temperatures in their habitat must fall within. In most cases, this requires the use of heating equipment such as under tank heaters, heat lamps, and other products.

Humidity is also very important, and incorrect humidity levels can result in improper sheds and other skin conditions and health problems. Different species will require different humidity levels, and you will need to research your reptile to see what it needs. You must monitor humidity levels and take steps to correct it if it is too high or too low.

Proper lighting is crucial to your reptile's overall health. Providing lighting for your reptile's habitat is much more involved than simply putting a desk lamp over the enclosure. You must use reptile specific bulbs, and you must supply the correct photoperiod. Different kinds of reptiles will need different lighting. For example, a nocturnal reptile will have much different lighting needs than a diurnal reptile.

Temperature, lighting, and humidity are not just things that can be set up and left either. They require daily monitoring to ensure that they are creating the right conditions in the habitat. You will probably need to make adjustments every day

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during spring and fall when temperatures vary more widely between daytime and nighttime temperatures. This kind of constant monitoring is not something that a child can do on his own. While children can be involved in this process, it's imperative that an adult supervises to make sure that housing conditions are correct.

Reptiles to Avoid as Pets for Children

Though you may think the information is intended to steer you away from purchasing reptiles for older children, that isn't true. Reptiles can be more difficult to care for than some other pets, but it can be done if you put in the time and effort, and they are fascinating and rewarding family pets. However, not all reptiles are suitable for children. The following is a list of reptiles that we recommend you **avoid**:

- Chameleons
- Green iguanas
- Amphibians
- Agamas
- Anoles
- Tegus
- Large snakes
- Water snakes
- Chelonians (turtles and tortoises)
- Herbivorous lizards

The reasons why these are not good pets for children vary. Some are too small and would be easily injured. Some are way too large for children to even pick up, let alone interact with. Some just require an entirely too complicated setup for you and your children to maintain properly. Amphibians and chelonians should not be handled very much or at all, and therefore tend to quickly become uninteresting for children.

Good Reptiles for Older Children

Though the list of reptiles to avoid is long, there are some reptiles that make great pets for families with older children. They include:

Lizards: Water Dragons
Leopard Geckos
Bearded Dragons
Some skinks

Snakes: Corn Snakes
Rat Snakes
King Snakes
Ball Pythons (captive bred only)

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All of these reptiles are suitable for family pets that children can help to care for.

Considerations when Choosing a Reptile

Which reptile you choose as your family pet will depend on a variety of different factors. You should consider each factor carefully to determine what reptile will fit in best with your family and your lifestyle. For example, if you have older children that prefer to interact directly with their pets, look for a reptile that either tolerates or likes being handled.

Other considerations include:

- **Diet**

  Is it an herbivore, a carnivore, or an omnivore? (Omnivores and carnivores are generally easier to feed.)

  If the reptile needs to eat live feeder insects, are you going to be able to handle that?

  If it eats pre-killed frozen prey, are you going to be squeamish about feeding one animal to another?

- **Adult size**

  Larger reptiles are not easy or safe for children of any age to handle and they will most likely need a larger living area than you can give them.

  Smaller reptiles will be difficult for your children to handle, and they could easily get injured if your child dropped them or held them too firmly.

- **Housing needs**

  Is the reptile from a temperate climate that has similar conditions to where you live?

  Is it a desert, tropical, or montane species that will require extreme temperatures and humidity levels?

- **Familiarity with species**

  Has the reptile been available to the public long enough that it is captive bred, or is it available only as a wild caught animal? (Captive bred is always preferred.)

  Is it common enough that you will be able to find a veterinarian experienced in caring for that species?

  Is it easy to find information regarding its care, or is the species so obscure as to make it difficult to find any help?

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Safety Tips

If you have decided to purchase a reptile for your family, there are certain safety tips you need to know about.

- Spend time taming and handling (some reptiles/amphibians should not be handled) the reptile before allowing your older children to have direct interaction with it. This is as much for the safety of the reptile as it is for your child. A child startled by being scratched may drop or throw a reptile out of fright.
- Teach your child not to kiss the reptile or share food with it to prevent the spread of *Salmonella*.
- Instruct your child about the importance of thoroughly washing her hands after touching the reptile or anything in its enclosure.
- Always supervise your child with the reptile, both for her safety and the safety of the reptile.
- Put a latch with a childproof lock on the enclosure to prevent your child from taking the reptile out when you are not there to supervise.
- Never allow children under 5 years of age to handle reptiles.
- Teach your child the correct way to handle, hold, or pet your reptile.

Watching children interact safely and positively with reptiles can be a very rewarding experience. In addition to combating negative stereotypes about reptiles as pets, it can also teach your children about the responsibility of pet ownership. As long as a parent is the primary caretaker, reptiles can make great pets for families with older children.

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