



## Taking Care of a Pet Dog or Cat: A Conversation about Love and Responsibility

*This milestone will invite your child to see themselves as caretakers of part of God's good creation.*

For many children, helping take care of a family pet is one of their earliest experiences of the responsibility of caring for someone else. Helping love and care for a pet can help children develop empathy, kindness, and gentleness. Sharing in the responsible care of a pet can also give children a sense of purpose and importance within the family. However, young children need help learning to treat animals well, both for the safety of the pet and the child.

### **Supplies:**

If you have dog: “How Do Dinosaurs Play with Their Dogs?”, by Jane Yolen and Mark Teague (recommended for 3–5-year-olds), or “The Trouble with Children (According to Dog)”, by Katie Weaver and Caner Soylu (recommended for 6–10-year-olds); toys, treats, food and water bowls.

If you have a cat: “How Do Dinosaurs Play with Their Cats?” by Jane Yolen and Mark Teague (recommended for 3–5-year-olds) or “The Trouble with Children (According to Cat)” by Katie Weaver and Caner Soylu (recommended for 6–10-year-olds); toys, treats, food and water bowls.

### **Set-Up:**

Have all supplies on hand and the pet nearby; perhaps sitting with your child on a sofa or comfortable space for reading.

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## **Milestone**

### **Opening Prayer:**

**Dear God, thank you for our pet, (pet's name). I am so happy to have a (dog/cat) to love and take care of. Help me learn to love them and help my family take good care of them. Amen.**

### **Scripture:**

**The very beginning of the Bible tells us that God made the earth and the sun and the stars. Then God made the plants and the trees and *all* of the animals and people. And God was very happy. God loves everything—and everyone—God made. God says it is good. This means that God loves (pet's name) and thinks they are good too. God invites us to help take care of the animals God loves. I wonder what it looks like to take good care of a dog/cat.**

*\*If there is silence, let that be for a few moments. If a child is not offering anything, simply make an I wonder statement. For example: **I wonder what food dogs/cats like to eat? I wonder what their favorite game is. I wonder what they are afraid of.** After you have offered a wonder statement or two, reframe the question saying, “**What do you wonder?**”*

**Let’s learn together about how to take care of (pet’s name).** Read whichever book you choose. These books get at appropriate animal care through a negative—what dogs and cats do not like or need. They are intended to be humorous to the child. Read the books with energy, exaggerating the negatives.

After you have read the story, talk about it. **What do you think (pet’s name) likes?** Affirm helpful responses: to be petted gently, fed regularly, played with, etc. Then say, **Let’s practice.**

If you have a dog and an appropriate outdoor space, this can be done outside. With a cat, or inadequate safe outdoor spaces, this can be done inside. First, help your child hold/pet your dog/cat as is appropriate for the child’s age. Help them engage your pet with an appropriate toy. Then, take them to where you keep the pet food and show them how much food to give. Remember that animals, even gentle ones, can be food aggressive; explain to your child that **we feed the dog/cat, but then we move away and leave them alone while they are eating.** This is part of how we respect the animal.

Consider making feeding the dog/cat your child’s “job.” If you do this, have them feed them at a set time (breakfast or dinner) when an adult will be present both to remind the child and to supervise.

When you have finished, set whatever boundaries make sense for your child. (*For example, tell them when/if they are allowed to get out the pet’s toys and initiate play. Are they allowed to use pet treats?*)

**Closing Prayer:**

**God, we thank you for the gift of animals in our lives, especially (pet’s name). Thank you for giving us (pet’s name) to love and to care for. Help us to be good caretakers so that (pet’s name) knows they are safe and loved when they are with us. Amen.**

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*\*\*\*Note for parents/caregivers of neurodiverse children: If your child tends to take hyperboles literally, be aware that these books use exaggeration and negative examples of pet interactions. Prepare and support your child however you see fit as they hear the story and interact with your pet.*