

Tips For Pet Interaction

Pets can be a wonderful part of family life, but children with autism may need extra support to interact safely and comfortably with pets. This handout offers practical tips to help your child feel successful with your pet at home. It focuses on two common challenges: children who are afraid of pets and children who may be too rough with pets.

When Your Child is Afraid of the Pet

- **Think small — start with tiny goals.** Aim for small successes like being near the pet without crying before expecting petting or interaction.
- **Go slow.** Slowly increase closeness over days or even weeks (distance → same room → brief pass-by → short observation → optional touch).
- **Create “pet = good stuff” moments.** When the pet is in the room and your child is calm, provide a reward (such as a preferred toy or screen time). This helps your child feel more comfortable around the pet.
- **Offer choices to reduce stress.** Giving your child control (where to sit, how close to be, and whether to interact) can help them stay calm and build comfort over time.
- **Include them in pet routines — even when the pet isn’t present.** Giving a child a “pet helper” role can increase positive interactions. Have them help filling the pet’s water and food dishes, buying new food, and even toss treats towards the pet.

Key Message: “My child can be calm and safe near the pet,” not “My child must love the pet.”

When the Child is Too Rough with the Pet

- **Your child is still learning.** With clear expectations and lots of practice, children can learn safe, gentle ways to interact with pets.
- **Teach like a real skill.** Practice “gentle hands” the same way you would teach any other skill — model it, prompt it, practice it, and reward success.
- **Short and simple interactions.** Use a simple routine (like “Ask → Pet 2 times → Hands back”) and keep early interactions brief so it’s easier to stay gentle.
- **Reward safe behavior.** Praise and reward calm behavior around the pet, gentle petting, and stopping right away when asked. Practice “freeze” games to make it easier for your child to stop in the moment.
- **Plan for high-energy moments.** It’s okay to use gates or separate spaces to keep everyone safe. If your child gets rough, calmly separate, take a short break, and practice gentle hands again later.

Key Message: “My child learns safe interaction skills over time,” not “My child has to be trusted right away.”

