

**Purpose:** To help children make responsible choices when choosing a pet.

## Choosing a pet

When choosing a pet, children (and their families) should consider their reasons for wanting an animal and ensure that they include a strong interest in that animal, a desire to love and cherish their pet and an over-riding commitment to care for that animal for the whole of its lifetime.

Next, they must decide upon what sort of animal suits their lifestyle. Parents must intervene here if necessary since an animal will affect home life. They should consider how much time their pet will take up and what space it requires. Remember that cats and dogs can be quite dirty. Cats in particular will bring home live and dead animals, walk from their litter tray to the kitchen work tops and claw furniture. Cats and dogs shed hair, which can trigger asthma in some people. They may also carry potentially serious diseases such as toxoplasmosis, a parasite spread through contact with faeces, which can cause blindness in children if ingested. This can be avoided by regularly worming your pet, the prompt removal of faeces and always washing your hands before putting them anywhere near your eyes or mouth after handling your pet cat or dog.

Once a family has decided upon a particular animal as a pet, they should consider all the points in the checklist opposite to ensure they are making the right choice.

**Ultimately, the question is not whether you will be happy with your pet, but whether your pet will be happy with you**

### Choosing a pet: checklist

- ☞ Does your family want you to have a pet?
- ☞ Have you talked to people with a similar pet?
- ☞ Have you read about caring for your pet?
- ☞ Have you worked out how much your pet will cost to look after?
- ☞ Are you prepared to clean your pet's home regularly?
- ☞ Does your pet require a companion?
- ☞ How will you prevent your pet having unwanted babies?
- ☞ How big will your pet grow and does it matter?
- ☞ How long will your pet live and does it matter?
- ☞ Will your pet bite or become difficult to look after?
- ☞ Will you always want your pet? (*A snake or pony may live for 25 years!*)
- ☞ Does your pet require special conditions such as light and heating?
- ☞ If you are planning to have cats, guinea pigs, rabbits etc. can you provide space in a garden for them?
- ☞ Can you find the time to care for your pet?
- ☞ Who will look after your pet when you go away?

### Sheet 6: Choosing the right pet

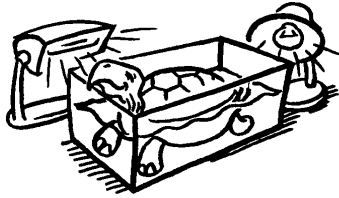
Invite the children to look at and colour the pictures on the activity sheet. Discuss the issues raised. Ask them to tick whether they agree or disagree with the statements. Discuss what makes a good pet.

Ask the children to divide a blank page in half. On one half of the page they should draw a pet animal and write a sentence about why it makes a good pet. On the other half of the page they should draw a different pet animal and write a sentence about why it makes a bad pet.

### Sheet 7: My favourite pet

Read the page entitled 'Exotic Pets' with the children and discuss. Then ask them to colour and cut out the pet animal pictures, and arrange them in order of preference, so that number 1 is the animal they think will make the best pet, and number 10 is the one they think will make the worst pet. Go around the class asking the children to justify their choices. As a follow-up activity, make a bar graph of the class results, or ask the children to make a neat version of their list and illustrate it.

# Are these pets...



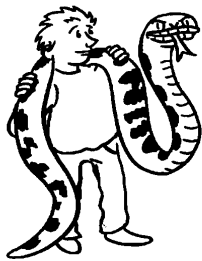
yes
no

easy to care for



yes
no

unfriendly



small	yes	no
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small

yes

no



expensive	yes	no
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expensive

yes

no



yes
no

likely to live longer than you



cuddly	yes	no
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cuddly

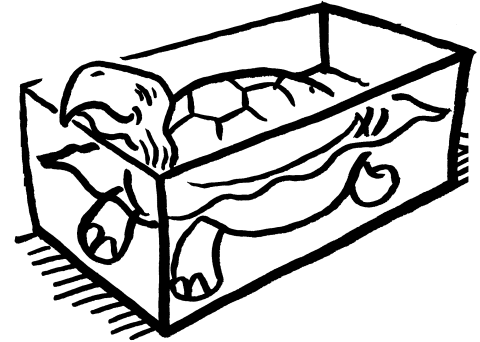
yes

no

# Exotic pets

Some animals appear in the 'Unwanted and unloved' columns of local newspapers time and again and consequently deserve to be left off the children's pet list entirely. Here are a few examples.

**Red-eared terrapins** are easy to obtain (some have even been given away as fairground prizes), but are quite difficult to care for. Though enchanting when small, red-eared terrapins require specialised care (heating, light, etc.) and may grow to the size of a dinner plate. As they grow, their tiny aquarium soon becomes too small and must be replaced by a larger, more expensive tank. Larger terrapins can be messy feeders and produce vast quantities of waste. Their water needs regular cleaning and the terrapins may also carry diseases such as salmonella. As they grow, unwanted terrapins are passed on



from one loveless home to the next, many suffering and dying in the process. Thousands more are thoughtlessly released into ponds and rivers where they die from the cold or, in warmer areas, survive and eat the local wildlife! For most people, red-eared terrapins become too big, too expensive, too dirty, too dull and simply too much to keep as pets.

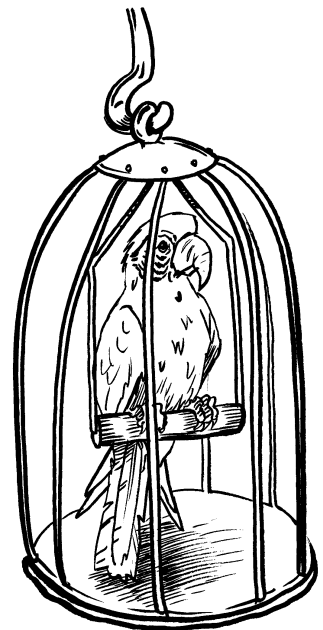
**Reptiles** generally, and snakes in particular, hold a fascination for boys wanting to gain notoriety among their friends. However, reptiles are fairly inactive creatures and children quickly tire of them. In addition, there are numerous examples of people buying small snakes that turn into giant pythons, totally unsuitable for the average household. The lives of these unwanted pets can be short and unpleasant.

**Birds** too can lead bleak lives if they are confined in a small area where they are unable to fly. Some exotic birds are wild-caught and die during capture or in transit. In general terms, any wild-caught animal should be rejected as a pet.

Trade in wild species has had a particularly damaging effect on **tropical fish** which die in their tens of thousands during capture, transport and, finally, in people's homes. There are many attractive locally bred fish which people could have as pets without harming wild fish populations or causing unnecessary suffering.

**Tortoises** have been over-collected, thus threatening the survival of the whole species. Many wild-caught animals suffer and die as a result of capture, storage, transit or lack of appropriate care in the home.

Always ask pet shop keepers where they get their animals from. Only buy when you are certain the animals have been bred in captivity - not caught in the wild - and ask to view a document that will prove this.



# Favourite pets

