

## Some Thoughts on Getting your Child a Pet Reptile

We are often contacted by parents wanting to get their child a reptile as a pet. While several of us grew up with reptiles and still love them, they do not always make the best pet for children. Below is a general list of things to consider before bringing a reptile into a young family. *\*This is not a complete list!!\** Every species is different and you should always do your research before bringing a new pet into your family!

### This is a very long-term commitment!

Most people looking into adopting a reptile are already aware that this is a long-term commitment, but we just want to stress that it really is. Geckos, axolotls and iguanas usually live 15-20 years, but some can make it past 30. Snakes and aquatic turtles usually live 20-50 years, maybe longer. The longevity of tortoises is well-known. Be prepared to have this animal for a long time. You may need to provide for your pet in your will!

### Choose the right pet

Every species of reptiles is unique. When deciding what kind of reptile to get, there are many factors to consider. One is your budget. How much money can you put into the regular care and maintenance of your pet? If your budget is tight, you may not be able to afford to spend \$40-\$60 on mercury vapor bulbs (MVBs), which emit both the heat and UVB light necessary for diurnal animals (iguanas, chameleons, bearded dragons, turtles and tortoises, etc). You might prefer a nocturnal animal that requires only heat (most snakes, leopard geckos) or one that can live at room temperature (frogs, crested geckos, axolotls). Another factor is how you plan to interact with your pet. If you want to be able to hold your pet, you shouldn't get a chameleon, which prefer to be admired from afar. Yet another factor is size. Animals that grow larger as adults require more room for their enclosures (which will also cost more), they eat more, and they poop more, which will require more cleaning. Some species (rat snakes, monitors, iguanas, etc) require much more socialization and handling in order to stay tame. How much time are you willing to put into your new pet? How will you deal with feeding? Would you rather have an herbivore that eats only fresh vegetables and fruits, a carnivore that eats live (or frozen/thawed) prey like insects and mice, or an omnivore that eats both? How easily can you obtain fresh veggies in the winter? What will you do when the feeder crickets escape in your house?

### Give your pet time to settle in

Reptile, like most pets, need time to settle in and get comfortable with their surroundings. A change of scenery, and the noise of being in a new house (especially if that house has young kids), will probably scare them. Place their enclosure in a quiet part of the house that can be closed off from children. Don't handle your new pet at all for a few days, and then only for short periods of time for a week or two. Your new pet may be too stressed to eat at first, and should be left alone until he's eating well. If you don't have the time to let your new pet adjust, you may want to consider getting a different type of pet. Although it will be hard to keep an excited child away from their new pet, the pet's well-being is more important than indulging your kids.

### Stress and injury to the animal

Children should ALWAYS be very closely supervised when handling reptiles. Some species (axolotls, salamanders, chameleons, day geckos, frogs, etc) should not be handled much by anyone, let alone children. One big concern for younger children is that they don't quite get how to handle animals gently. We don't want to adopt an animal into a home where it will likely be injured. In addition, loud noises and over-handling can cause serious stress for an



animal, and stress can kill. If a child grabs a lizard the wrong way, many will drop their tails (and sometimes even their legs). This is traumatic for both the lizard and the child. Children also tend to be loud and make sudden movements, both of which are terrifying for small reptiles. Chronic stress from this can cause a reptile to stop eating and eventually die.

### **Stress and injury to the child**

When they feel threatened, most reptiles will bite, scratch or poop (possibly all of these). Are you okay with your child being covered in visible bites and scratch marks? While a bite can be concerning, the poop is the worse problem, since most reptiles harbor Salmonella bacteria in their intestinal tract. If you've ever had Salmonella-related food poisoning (you can also get it from live poultry, undercooked chicken and raw eggs), you know it's not pleasant. In young children, the immune system is still developing, making a Salmonella infection even worse. Kids also have a habit of sticking things in their mouths and rubbing their faces and eyes a lot, which just makes it more likely that they will get sick. Aquatic turtles are the worst for spreading bacteria, since it gets all in their water and all over them. This doesn't mean kids should be completely kept away from reptiles forever, just that parents should keep the hand-sanitizer close by, and teach their kids the importance of washing their hands.

### **Who will be responsible for care?**

If you do get your child a reptile, all of the care should be done, or at least supervised, by you. Keep in mind that your average 7-year-old is not going to want to feed and clean up after any pet, no matter how much they love it (trust us, we've been on both sides of that fight). Older children (say, 10+) can help with feeding and cleaning, but you will still have to do some (most) of the work yourself. Also keep in mind you may have to take care of the pet when your child moves out or goes off to college. Many apartments and dorms do not allow pets. If, for example, you are afraid of snakes or can't deal with feeding them, then you should probably not adopt one for your child unless they are already settled in their own home.

### **Temperament: Is this the right pet for you?**

As far as being friendly, most reptiles are great with kids. There are always exceptions, but this section contains general behavioral qualities that have been observed by our volunteers with animals in our care. Snakes are the best in our opinion because most are very laid back and love to be held and petted, although some species (ball pythons, corn snakes) are more docile than others (rat snakes, carpet pythons). Even some lizards, and most turtles and tortoises rarely ever bite. Geckos are more fragile (for older kids only), but usually don't mind being handled at all. Bearded dragons and blue-tongue skinks can make great pets too. Smaller lizards (anoles, long-tailed lizards, etc) tend to be fearful and don't enjoy handling. Larger lizards like iguanas, tegus and monitors tend to be aggressive unless you work with them regularly.

### **Other concerns**

Are you willing to spend the extra time and money to research and prepare a nutritious diet (with all the necessary vitamin and mineral supplements, cut to the right size, etc)? Are you prepared for the costs needed to provide a reptile with the appropriate size habitat with correct heating, lighting, and humidity? Do you have a qualified exotic vet that you could take the animal to if it gets sick? Do you have a pet-sitter knowledgeable in reptiles lined up so you can go on vacation? Leopard geckos, some snakes, and many other species are nocturnal, so they'll want to sleep most of the day; how is that going to fit with your family?

