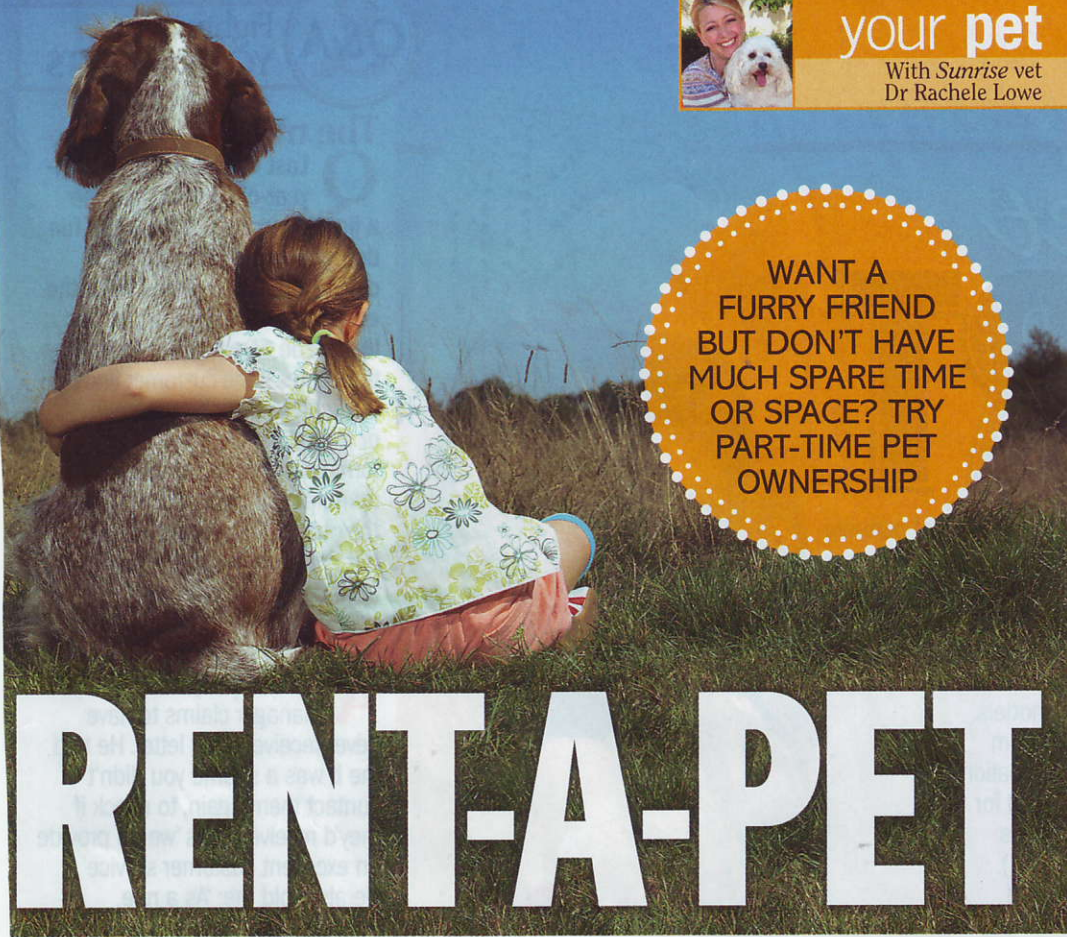




your pet

With *Sunrise* vet
Dr Rachele Lowe



WANT A
FURRY FRIEND
BUT DON'T HAVE
MUCH SPARE TIME
OR SPACE? TRY
PART-TIME PET
OWNERSHIP

RENT-A-PET

The evidence in support of children having pets is compelling, as worldwide research reveals kids with pets are happier, more popular at school and have fewer days of illness than those without a furry friend. Contrary to popular belief, they're even less likely to have allergies, especially if they have pets early in life.

Pets also play a role in emotional development. In 2000, Dr June McNicholas and Dr Glyn Collis published a report in the UK that found kids had such a special bond with their pets they even listed them in the top 10 things they'd turn to in a troublesome situation. The researchers concluded that pets aren't judgemental and this helps children form a special bond.

'Pets are important because they don't care if a child hasn't performed well at school or has done something silly or naughty,' the co-authors explain. 'No matter how bad a child's day, a pet's unconditional love can help repair self-esteem.'

Of course, that's great if your circumstances allow you the luxury of keeping a pet. But what if you don't have the room or time for a barking buddy?

Some larger hotels around the world have already introduced a 'rent-a-pet' scheme, where patrons can take a dog running or have it as company for the day. In Hong Kong and Japan, where it's almost impossible to find dog-friendly accommodation, pet rental services allow people to spend quality time with a dog and return it at the end of the day or week, no leash attached, so to speak. In the US you'll also find rent-a-pet schemes for special occasions and even guard dog rentals available.

It would be hard to find a dog for rent here in Australia, but there are still plenty of ways to introduce your children to the value of animals.

For those who have enough space for a dog but don't have time for a family pet, consider being a pet minder, where you take a dog into your own home while its owners are on holiday. For a few weeks the dog lives with you as part of your family. If you join a company like Don't Fret Pet (visit www.dontfretpet.com.au), they conduct interviews to ensure the right pet goes to the right 'foster family'. When this works well, your children get to enjoy the company of their foster dog every time its owners go away on holidays. Sometimes these arrangements can go on for years, with the kids growing up with a permanent part-time pet.

For those of you who have a more quirky child to provide for, there are now a wealth of mobile set-ups that specialise in unusual creatures and Australian wildlife. Businesses

such as Geckoes Wildlife Presentations (visit www.geckoeswildlife.com.au) and Crocodile Encounters (visit crocodileencounters.com.au) will make your next children's party memorable by bringing along all sorts of wild critters such as snakes, crocodiles, frogs, lizards, spiders and turtles. Not only do children enjoy getting up close to these animals, but they also learn about the basic care of reptiles and amphibians, as well as information on biology, ecology and conservation. Of course, if you're not keen on the slippery little suckers, but you like the idea of a mobile pet visit, there are plenty of kiddie farms and baby animal visits available for parties.

The key message from the recent studies is kids really benefit from exposure to animals and pets. Regardless of your circumstances, there's a way to get your children involved with pets, whether it's a live-in furry friend or just the occasional visitor.

◀ A pet's unconditional love can help repair kids' self-esteem ▶