

CHOOSING THE RIGHT SMALL PET

Small pets come in all different shapes and sizes and sometimes it's hard to know which one is right for you and your family. Our advice is here to help you with your decision so that everyone, including your pet, is happy...

Gerbils

Gerbils are great fun to watch. They are burrowing animals by nature and they spend hours digging for pleasure which can be captivating! Because they're quick and agile, young children can find it quite difficult to hold them without squeezing too hard so they're generally more interesting to watch than to handle.

Gerbils are fascinating but if you have young children and want them to be able to handle their pet, it might be better to consider another small animal.

Hamsters

Hamsters are fun and active pets. They are nocturnal which means they can be a disappointing pet for children because they're fast asleep during the day and then they emerge just when it's time for bed. If they are disturbed from sleep they may bite and their eyesight isn't great so they're easily startled by sudden movements.

It's also important to know what kind of hamster you're getting – while dwarf hamsters like company and can be kept in same sex pairs or groups, Syrian hamsters are solitary and need to live alone.

Mice

Mice are natural explorers and can provide hours of fun to watch as they climb rope and dash through tunnels. Mice are usually friendly and they rarely bite but, because they're so small and quick, it can be difficult for small children to hold them. To pick a mouse up hold the base – not the tip – of their tail gently but firmly and then lift their back end and slide your hand under their body.

Rats

Rats absolutely love social interaction and they can make great pets for both adults and children. They get very depressed if they are left without attention.

Rats need more cage space than mice, hamsters or gerbils and they also like to have a few levels so you'll need to make sure there's enough room. Aquariums don't make suitable homes for rats.

Guinea pigs

Guinea pigs can make good companions for adults and children. They are fun to watch and have a varied vocabulary. Once you get to know them it is possible to tell when they are happy, sad, excited or angry. They are not happy just to be left in a hutch at the bottom of the garden but need shelter from all extremes of weather and a run where they can graze freely, safe from predators. It's vital that they are with another of their own kind. Gentle by nature, guinea pigs can be a good firsttime companion for a child (as long as there is considerable parental interest).

Consideration needs to be given to their fairly long lifespan, which can be up to seven years. If you are buying them for your children, please consider whether they will still be interested in seven years time. Many animals end up in rehoming centres such as Blue Cross because children reach an age when their priorities change.

Chinchillas

If housed and handled correctly, chinchillas make intelligent, happy and interesting companions. When you know them well and they are happy in their homes, they can be taught to do basic tricks in order to earn a treat!

Consideration must be given to their long lifespan, which is around 15 years. You need to bear this in mind if you are buying them for your children – who may have grown up and left home by the time the chinchillas have reached later life.

Chinchillas are nocturnal animals, and need a very large cage plus a dust bath (this is essential for their mental and physical well-being). They are enthusiastic dust bathers and do make quite a lot of mess! Chinchillas need to live with a companion – either a female with a neutered male, or litter-mates of the same sex (they will usually live harmoniously as long as they have been together since birth).

As well as a large cage with different levels for their accommodation, they need exercise time out of their cage and are responsive and lively animals.

Rabbits

Most people are of the opinion that rabbits are excellent pets for children. There are, however, many things to be considered before thinking of giving a home to these animals, especially when you have young children.

Rabbits are prey animals and need to be ready to run from danger at all times. Those rabbits kept only in hutches have nowhere to feel secure and when a child tries to lift them from the hutch, the rabbit may try to scratch, kick or bite to get away from perceived danger. Children can be disappointed when they find their rabbits are not keen to be picked up and

cuddled. They do make good companions for children as long as their accommodation is correct and the handling is done with sensitivity and under adult supervision.

The best kind of accommodation for rabbits when children are involved in their daily care, is a wooden Wendy house construction with an attached run area. This will give children the opportunity to sit quietly and wait for the rabbits to come to them. This way the animals will feel more confident as they will have all four feet on the ground and will be able to hop away if they want to.

It also means that the rabbits can still be given attention even during bad weather and children will be able to groom them and watch them having fun. It's important that a rabbit has a companion of its own kind. Many people are of the opinion that rabbits and guinea pigs can live quite happily together, but this is NOT the case. They do not speak the same language and rabbits can sometimes inflict quite severe injuries on guinea pigs.

The approximate lifespan of a rabbit is between six and eight years, so careful thought needs to be given before taking on these animals.

Please be sure that when buying any small animal for yourself or your children you always use a reputable breeder. Make sure the animals have been sexed properly and are of the right age to leave their mothers. Never buy animals from pet shops unwilling to spend time with you making sure you understand the commitment being taken on.