

Kids and Reptiles

Reasons why kids should keep reptiles.

By Russ Case

Can I get a dog? Or a hamster? Or a boa constrictor?"

These days many parents are likely to be asked by their children to get a pet reptile. Reptiles are more prevalent than ever, after all. Not only are they on display in pet and reptile stores, but they also appear in movies, commercials and other media outlets. Whether this is a good thing or not — the “not” because of the possibility of impulse buying — whenever an animal is featured in, say, television commercials, a demand for that animal can arise, especially on behalf of children. One wonders how many giant day geckos have been sold as a result of the Geico gecko, chihuahuas because of the Taco Bell chihuahua, clown fish because of the movie Finding Nemo, and so on.

Personally, I love the fact that children are fascinated by reptiles and plead with their parents to keep them as pets. Luckily, reptiles can make great pets for them, provided the right approach is taken.

Too Cool for Thought

Being informed about an animal may seem like a no-brainer, but it has to be hammered home anyway. Many people buying reptiles, especially kids, can get so caught up in the “coolness factor” of the animals that they surrender to impulse buying, which is when an animal is purchased without any real thought as to its suitability as a pet for that particular person — not just now but in the future, too.

Whether you are asking a parent for a herp pet or a parent who has just been asked, there are three important things to consider regarding pet reptiles in general.

Many reptiles can live a long time. Will your 12-year-old still want that tortoise when he or she (the kid, not the tortoise) is 20 years old? How about 50 years old? Tortoises are famous for being long-lived, but many herps can live longer than 10 years.

Cute baby reptiles can get big. Visit an animal rescue and ask how often they take in green iguanas, large constrictor snakes or African spurred tortoises. These species are the primary candidates for the grew-too-big-for-me-to-take-care-of-it category, but additional reptiles, such as most monitors, tegus, red-eared sliders and others, may outgrow enclosures that were fine for them as babies but are no longer.

Will the animal get the proper care? Proper husbandry is a must for any animal whether it's scaly, furry or feathery. Knowing how long animals will live and how big they get is important, but a herp's specific care requirements should be researched — and determined realistic for a youngster to provide — before it is brought home.

The good news is not all reptiles are very demanding pets. This is one huge reason why some make great pets for children. Read on, and you'll find there are seven other reasons why reptiles make great pets for young people.

Captive Bred Is Always Best Young hobbyists starting out in reptiles should be given the best chance of success, and captive-bred animals provide just that. Many species described in this article are widely bred in captivity, so buying a captive-bred pet should not be difficult. Captive-bred animals are already acclimated to captivity. They won't stress out as much as a wild reptile that's been captured and shipped. Many of these can become fine pets, but others harbor illnesses that might not be apparent at first. Such health issues are less likely in captive-bred reptiles.¹ Reptiles are “Low-Maintenance” Pets.

Pets such as dogs and cats, though beloved by millions, require a lot of attention. Reptiles don't.

For one thing, pet reptiles don't need to be fed every day. Every other day is fine, and some don't even need to be fed that much. Although not recommended for children, huge pythons have been known to go a year without eating! I would never recommend that a pet snake be fed only once a year, but only feeding them a couple times a week is fine.

When discussing pets, the issues of hair and the maintenance that goes along with it often come up. I wonder how many owners of long-haired dogs and cats wish their pets didn't require all that maintenance and cleaning. Grooming their

beloved pets may be a labor of love for many, I suppose, but consider the convenience of keeping a reptile. It doesn't have to be groomed, and people are not likely to be allergic to it.

Another facet of a reptile's low-maintenance reputation is in regard to the animal's need for owner interaction. This is aside from what's required for general health, such as feeding and cleaning. Reptiles need both — like any pet. But dogs, for instance, need their owners' love and attention for their psychological well-being. Neglected dogs can become depressed and frustrated, which can result in damaging behavior. This is one characteristic that makes dogs so endearing to so many people — not because they may misbehave and chew on your coffee table, but because they crave affection from "their people."

Reptiles don't crave affection from their owners. Although many accept handling, most are simply tolerating it. Some may actually enjoy being handled, and many reptile owners say their pets love being held. The bottom line, though, is that reptiles are also content to be left alone, and they won't chew up your furniture if you do so.

Moreover, there's this: A pet reptile doesn't need to be taken for a walk to go to the bathroom.

Case's Dozen

If Russ Case had to pick 12 suitable pet reptiles for kids, he would pick:

1. bearded dragon
2. leopard gecko
3. crested gecko
4. corn snake
5. ball python
6. California kingsnake
7. red-footed tortoise
8. Russian tortoise
9. leopard tortoise
10. red-eared slider
11. painted turtle
12. common musk turtle

2. Reptiles Don't Require Much Space.
You already know how large a reptile gets is an important nugget of knowledge to possess. Some can get very big. African spurred tortoise hatchlings, for instance, are the essence of cute when you see them marching around their enclosures like little tanks. But over the years those cute little tortoises turn into behemoths. Granted, the adults could still be considered cute, but I'm not sure how cute you will think they are if one has burrowed into your backyard and unearthed your entire sprinkler system.

The reptile species I recommend for children (see "Case's Dozen" sidebar) remain a manageable size and will not require a room-sized enclosure. Most will do fine in a 20-gallon terrarium or enclosure of similar dimensions: approximately 3 feet long and 1½ feet wide. Some, such as a single crested or leopard gecko, or a kingsnake, could even be kept in a 10-gallon terrarium. Turtles and tortoises will need more space. The leopard tortoise, for instance, can grow to about 20 inches in length and weigh 30 pounds; it will eventually need a pen in which to roam.

Yet the space a reptile requires for exercise is meager compared to some pets. Here again I'm thinking of dogs and how they need space to run and play. For this there are dog parks, but when was the last time you saw a reptile park? They don't exist because reptiles don't need to exercise the way dogs do. The space within their enclosures is all they require.