

How to Safely Introduce Kids to Reptiles

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Children have a natural curiosity about the world around them, and especially about animals. To help them develop respect and appreciation for animals (rather than fear) as they grow up, it's important to facilitate as many positive experiences as possible. Exotic animals like reptiles are often particularly interesting to children as a novelty, and if you have reptiles, you've probably been asked by more than one friend or family member if their child(ren) can come visit.

Of course you want to share your passion, but in order to create the best experience possible for all parties involved, it's best to take a few precautionary measures:

Know the child

Children of any age can interact with reptiles, but the child's age and cognitive/physical development will affect the best way to create a safe experience for both the child and animal.

For example, children under the age of four lack fine motor control, and may need an adult to guide their hand through the motion of petting the reptile. It's best for children around this age not to be allowed to hold small animals due to the risk of harming the animal by dropping it or squeezing it.

For older children who can be trusted to hold the animal, make sure they hold it over a surface such as a couch or table so the animal won't be harmed if dropped. Even when this seems unlikely, dropping is a common response if a child gets startled by the animal.

Even if the child is old enough to safely hold your reptile, don't let the child or their parent(s) pressure you into doing something that you are not comfortable with. It is perfectly fine to keep the animal in your hands rather than letting the child hold it if you are worried about your pet being harmed or stressed out.

There are also other ways children can interact with reptiles. For example, since turtles and tortoises are uncomfortable with being held, let them roam freely in an enclosed area where the child can watch and maybe pet its shell. Or, the child can use feeding tongs or a cup to offer a snack to the reptile.

Know the reptile

Not every reptile is going to be great with kids (or even strangers), even if their species is known for being generally tolerant. Some ball pythons will ball up and refuse to come out, some crested geckos will start jumping wildly, some leopard geckos will try to run away, some corn snakes will bite, etc. There's always exceptions to the rule, so it's important to know your reptiles and make your own judgements about which ones are safe to have around children and will be the least stressed by the encounter.

Signs that your reptile is a good candidate for showing to kids:

- Calm in new situations
- Takes a lot to get stressed out
- Not startled by swift movements
- Tolerant to petting and prodding (how do they act at the vet?)
- Shows other symptoms of stress before resorting to biting

Of course, never let a reptile be handled by children if you don't know it well enough to predict its response!

Particular caution is advised for giant predator species such as giant pythons, tegus, iguanas, large monitors, etc., as these species are capable of inflicting severe injuries to humans.

Supervise, supervise, supervise!

Never let children be alone with reptiles. There should be at least one adult present and nearby throughout the whole interaction, and more than one adult when giant snakes are involved. This decreases the likelihood of accidents.

It also helps to set clear rules for the child(ren). For example:

- Never try to pet an animal without asking first.
- Gentle petting with two fingers only. No grabbing, poking, smacking, pulling, etc.
- Pet the reptile on the body or tail, not the head.
- Stay calm and quiet.

Make it clear that if the child can't follow these rules, they don't get to pet or hold the reptile. Children learn by example, so it helps to model these rules yourself.

As an additional precaution, make sure that snakes never wrap around the child's neck. Even a ball python is strong enough to accidentally harm a child through the normal constrictive force it uses for climbing, so keep a sharp eye on any child that is holding a snake.

Biting is always possible

While some reptiles are more prone to biting than others, it's important to remember that any animal with a mouth can bite. Many reptiles will bite when they get irritated enough and escape is not an option. Even if the bite does not break the skin, the surprise and discomfort can still cause distress to a child, turning a positive encounter into a potentially traumatic one.

Here are some measures to reduce risk:

- scent the child's hands with hand sanitizer so they don't potentially smell like food
- avoid using hands/fingers to offer snacks
- keep the reptile's face away from the child's face

Keep an eye on your reptile's body language throughout the encounter, and keep in mind that, just like people, even the most trustworthy, calm reptiles can have bad days where their patience is short and they'd rather be left alone. If your pet is showing signs of agitation or being "done" with the encounter, put them away immediately, even if the child becomes upset.

Conclusion

Supervised encounters with captive reptiles can be a great way to teach children about the natural world and spark admiration and respect for these amazing animals. However, as with any animal encounter, safety and comfort for both parties need to be considered at all times.

Never force a child to interact with an animal against their will, as this will likely backfire and turn a potentially positive encounter into a bad memory. Let the child take the lead in this aspect, even if they don't go further than simply watching the reptile.

And of course, always have the child wash or sanitize their hands immediately after petting an animal!