

Teaching Gentleness

By Ruth Hanley



Your pet is probably a great source of wonderment to your small child. Children are fascinated by the cause and effect of their interactions with animals, even when they aren't gentle. In October, many Christians celebrate the life of Saint Francis of Assisi by having a Blessing of the Animals service, inspired by his work and words. Teach children gentleness toward family pets, inspired by Saint Francis.

For
Young Families

Season

Fall

Needed

Bible, stuffed animal or animal puppet, touch-and-feel book about animals

Activity Plan

1. Gather the family and read aloud Genesis 1:26 from your Bible, or use the text below:
2. *Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."*
3. Talk about how God told the first people God created to take good care of all the animals, and they did! Discuss: *What can we do to take care of our pet?*
4. Take turns demonstrating how to be gentle with a pet by handling and petting a stuffed animal or puppet. You may need to guide the hand of a young child in a gentle, appropriate way. Sing the following song (Tune: "Open, Shut Them").

*Gentle patting,
Gentle patting,
Give a little pat.
Gentle patting,
Gentle patting,
We're patting our cat! (Or dog, bird, etc.)*

5. Read a touch-and-feel book about pets or animals and bless each animal as you read about it. For example, say, "God bless the *(animal name)*. Thank you, God, for *(animal name)*!" Invite young family members to demonstrate how to pet the fuzzy pictures carefully. Praise them when they use gentle touches. Another way to do this is to have children line up their stuffed animals and pet each one gently on the back saying, "God bless the *(animal name)*. Thank you, God, for *(animal name)*!" Adding animal sounds to the blessing would be fun, too!
6. Sit with your pet. Take turns petting it gently and saying:



God bless (pet name). Thank you, God, for (pet name).

7. When your young child tries to pet your family pet in an unsafe way, intervene quickly but gently so that both child and animal are safe. Then say, “Uh-oh! What is a gentle touch? Can you show me gentle?” Have the child demonstrate a gentle touch on your shoulder. Then distract the child to play with something else for awhile. The animal may be too agitated to be petted again.
8. Reflection: It is challenging to teach gentleness toward animals, and it can be frustrating to have to intervene often between a curious child and a pet. Know that pets and children are both resilient and that children are learners by nature. One day soon your work in tending the seeds of a loving, gentle relationship between your child and your pet will pay off. Take time to take deep breaths—often, if necessary—and start again.

Additional Resources

Children’s book recommendations:

- *God Made Animals* (board book) by Michael Vander Klipp
- *All About God’s Animals – Colors* (board book with photos) by Janyre Tromp
- *The Baby Bible – Animals* (board book with action prompts) The Baby Bible Series
- *I See the Creature God Made* (I See Board Books) by Laura A. Miller
- *Inside Noah’s Ark* (board book with look-through windows) by Charles Reasoner
- *God Bless: Prayers for Little Hands* (Touch-and-feel board book with pop-in play pieces) by Lois Rock
- *Tails are Not for Pulling* (board book) by Elizabeth Verdick and Marieka Heinlen
- *Be Gentle with the Dog Dear* (hardcover) by Matthew Baek
- *Who Is coming to Our House* (board book) by Joseph Slate
- *The Song of St. Francis and the Animals* (hardcover) by Pat Mora

Web resources for parents:

- Mr. Rogers has [this](#) to say about pets and small children.
- “What-to-Expect-When-You’re-Expecting” author Heidi Murkoff gives [this](#) advice about pets and toddlers.
- *Today’s Parent* has [these](#) tips for parents with toddlers and cats or dogs.
- [Link](#) to information on exploring the work of Saint Francis of Assisi with little ones: activities, projects, books, Blessing of the Animals service.

