

Getting a Pet

Taking on a pet needs more than a little consideration

Many advocate that having a pet in the family home is a definite asset. Where children are involved it teaches them caring and tolerance; and the bonus is that they have someone to play with. For older people, especially those living alone, a pet is generally a companion which asks very little and gives so much. Anyone who has been brought up with a pet as part of the family knows some if not all of the issues that accompany the additional responsibility; and they might be inclined to bow to the wishes of their own kids when they plead: "Can we get a pet?" However, it's not as straightforward as it sounds.

Depending on the pet and its age, there are always teething problems to overcome; like toilet training and pre-existing behavioral traits that may not be entirely acceptable. Usually these matters can be dealt with adequately over time so that the new member of the family eventually integrates well; but patience is the key here. It has to be remembered that we are dealing with an animal which doesn't understand the human language; so different prompts are necessary if the pet is to learn what we want it to do, or not as the case may be. During this early training, in most instances getting the pet to repeat a certain action over and over will do the trick; guided by physical signals such as pointing or maneuvering the animal into a certain position, perhaps accompanied by a single, simple word. To help with the learning process, there must be a reward, a treat of some kind which is given each time the pet does it right. And if it enjoys doing whatever, it will be more likely to want to do it again.

The upside of all this is that treating a pet with kindness will ensure a loyal friend for life; unfortunately, there is more to consider than just a loving, fun creature to come home to after work or school. Apart from the initial inconvenience, other nuisance factors will one day become apparent. What about time spent away from home, holidays for instance? A dog might be good in the car, even look forward to a trip out with the family; but there are some places and venues which don't allow pets. In Australia they are barred from entering national parks and water catchment areas; and some caravan parks and holiday homes won't have them either; so any excursions have to be well planned in advance to avoid disappointment. Cats are usually different, stay-at-home animals; although I know of the odd one that accompanied its owner in the car quite happily; but whether it's dogs, cats, rabbits, even pet mice, they can't be left on their own to fend for themselves. And this means when going away for extended periods, making alternative arrangements for their care. Perhaps a friend or neighbour would agree to pop in daily. The only other way is to, book them into a kennel, cattery, or leave them with a minder.

Taking this disadvantage a step further, people living in rented accommodation are often restricted with respect to pets. Maybe the place they are staying currently allows them; but what about if the residents have to move? Finding somewhere else that does allow pets could reduce options considerably and cause huge problems. Then what happens to the pet? Maybe it is farmed out to someone else who can take care of it; or as a last resort it is taken to an animal shelter. These establishments not only house unwanted pets, but they also try to find them new homes. Many people get their pets from rescue centres, hoping to give them a better life than they have had up to that point. It has to be

remembered, though, that some animals may have been mistreated and as a result have formed a mistrust or fear of humans in general, and the cruel types in particular. Extra-special care and patience will be required if the pet is to settle in to a new and strange environment. It can be done, but not everyone is cut out for this kind of re-training.

Another consideration is the animal's health. Regular walks and exercise are essential; plus, of course, the right kind of diet; but there will be occasions when commonsense and plain TLC is not enough and a trip to the vet's is in order. It is then realised that nothing comes cheap and these professionals know how to charge. Suddenly the family budget is stretched to the point when having a pet is no longer viable; so it's back to the rescue centre; which is regrettable for adults, sad for kids; and the poor animal doesn't know whether it's coming or going.

Events such as birthdays, Christmas and the like seem the ideal times to give a pet as a gift. A kitten in box decorated with fancy paper, or a puppy with a ribbon tied round its neck might look cute and will probably leave the person receiving it wide-eyed and happy. Children especially are overjoyed, and when it is explained to them that their new friend has to be looked after they usually promise faithfully to feed, water and care for it. But kids follow the rules one day at a time, and when tomorrow comes it's a different ball game; with the accent on game. They have other things to do, toys to play with, friends to meet; so the new pet takes second place. In many cases, the adults in the picture then realise that what sounded like a good idea has merely landed them with another responsibility that they could well do without. The outcome of these situations is obvious. In truth, had they given it more thought in the first place, they would have bought just another toy that could have been eventually ignored by the child and put back in the box with no harm done.

If you are considering getting a pet, please think long and hard first. Animals have rights too and we humans need to respect that.

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