

Filling Your Empty Nest

By Jane A. Barber, DVM, MS, DACT

The right pet for the right family



The right pet adds abundantly to the quality of life for the whole family. The wrong pet can be the bane of your existence. Remember, the impeccably-behaved Jack Russell Terrier (JRT) featured in the popular television show “Frasier”? The little guy was cute as a button, never made a sound, and sat quietly on the sofa. Soon condo-dwelling empty nesters from coast to coast were lining up to get their own JRT’s. Talk about a mismatch. A little research reveals that the JRT, in contrast to Frasier’s deceptively calm, well-trained dog, is a feisty, extremely high energy breed that requires a lot of exercise on a daily basis. Without the proper environment, JRT’s can be loud, destructive, and even aggressive.

The best choice for a pet is rarely made on an impulse. A new dog is a 15 to 20-year commitment. Factors to consider when deciding upon the right pet include your family dynamics, lifestyle, potential health issues (for both the people and the pet) and housing. There are over 200 breeds of dogs, not counting “designer breeds” such as Labradoodles and mixed breeds of dogs. Do your homework when deciding which size, shape and temperament of dog will be the best fit for your family. Prospective planning can keep you from making an ill-fated choice. Your family veterinarian is a great resource for pet selection counseling. The wisest visit you make to your vet may be the one you make before you get your new puppy.

Puppies are great, but puppies are not dogs

Most people want a dog, but get a puppy. They forget the trials and tribulations of “puppy-dom.” Puppies are a LOT of work. Consider carefully the following Top 10 reasons for adopting an adult dog:

1. In a word – housebroken. If you decide a puppy is for you, stock upon paper towels and carpet cleaner. You will need plenty of each for the house breaking process.
2. Intact underwear. With a puppy, you can count on losing one half of at least a dozen pairs of socks along with a variety of unmentionables, not to mention your favorite pair of shoes to the teething process.
3. A good night’s sleep. Away from his mother and littermates, a new puppy can be very demanding at 2:00 AM (and 4:00 AM and 6:00 AM).
4. Intact newspaper and the time to read it. A puppy takes a lot of time, so even if your newspaper doesn’t get chewed up you won’t have the time to read it, at least not for a while.

5. Easier and less frequent veterinary visits. Adult adoptees typically are current on their vaccinations and heartworm preventative, and have already been spayed or neutered. And they rarely require emergency vet trips for having chewed or ingested something dangerous.
6. What you see is what you get. With an adult, the choice is yours: large or small, sweet or sassy, high energy or couch potato, landlubber or seafarer, brilliant or "Odie." You get to see the finished product.
7. No scars on your hands and ankles. It's back to the teething thing – it takes puppies a while to discriminate appendages from toys.
8. Less chance for a pet "mismatch." It's often hard to tell what the "finished product" will end up being with a puppy.
9. A companion that's ready, right now, to go and do with you. You can come home from a hard day's work and enjoy quality time instead of clean up time.
10. The bond. Adult dogs that have been uprooted from their homes and fallen on hard times are likely to bond deeply with their new family.

As with our human population, dogs are living longer than ever before and a four or five year old dog can provide your family with many years of love and companionship.

Heinz 57 or Purebred

You will need to choose whether to get a purebred or mixed breed dog. There are many homeless puppies and dogs available for adoption through your local humane societies and city or county shelters. Shelter adoptees are usually screened for health or behavioral problems.

Many times shelter dogs make ideal family pets because they seem to appreciate the fine new life they have been given. But dogs that have been abandoned or relinquished to shelters can also come with a lot of "baggage." They may be fearful of people or have other anxiety disorders. Often you do not have any history on the dogs prior to relinquishment. A shelter adoption can be like getting a "pig in a poke." Alternatively, it often is a "win win" for both the pet and the adoptive family, and what could give you more joy than knowing you have truly saved a life.

If you choose to get a purebred dog then you will have valuable information as to your pet's size and temperament, likes and dislikes, exercise and space requirements, familial history, longevity, and health concerns. Purchase of purebred puppies allows breeders to continue to produce the dogs that can be our eyes and ears, forewarn our seizures, find lost hikers, and help our police officers and troops protect us from the "bad guys."

Pet store puppies

Please DO NOT purchase your puppy from a pet store. No reputable dog breeder would ever, under any circumstances, sell their puppies through a pet store. Virtually all puppies sold through pet stores are obtained from puppy mills. The application process from a reputable breeder makes getting your first home mortgage loan seem easy. Reputable breeders do not breed dogs for the income. Although you can expect to pay \$1000 or more for a well-bred puppy, that price pales in comparison to the expense incurred by the breeder in getting the litter "on the ground." Some of these expenses include health certifications (called "clearances") on their dogs, in addition to all the expenses of the breeding (ovulation timing, semen collection and shipment, artificial insemination, pregnancy ultrasound, etc.) The dog breeder's purpose in doing a breeding is to improve their breed. They select the puppy with the best breed potential and the rest of the puppies in the litter are sold as pets to loving, responsible families.

Purebred adoptions

There is another option for a family that desires a dog with the known characteristics of a certain breed. Almost all of the breeds have an affiliated rescue organization. For example, if you were looking for a purebred Rottweiler, you could contact North Carolina Rottweiler Rescue. This is truly a way to “have your cake and eat it too” – you can open your heart and home to a dog in need and still adopt a dog with breed-specific attributes.

The end result

The benefits of pet ownership are self evident, as any pet owner will tell you. Pets give us all their love, all the time, unconditionally and ask for very little in return. They don't care what we look like or how much money we make. But for the skeptics amongst us, 25 years of research has proven that living with pets provides certain health benefits. It's been said that there is no psychiatrist in the world like a puppy licking your face. The list of benefits includes:

1. Less depression. Pet owners with AIDS are far less likely to suffer from depression than those without pets.
2. Lower blood pressure. Stockbrokers with high blood pressure who adopted pets had lower blood pressure in stressful situations than those without pets.
3. Boosted immunity. The old thinking was to avoid pet ownership if your family was allergy-prone. However, studies show that infants and children growing up with pets have less risk of allergies and asthma.
4. Increased longevity. Heart attack patients with pets survive longer than those without.
5. Less anxiety. Alzheimer's patients have fewer anxious outbursts when there is a pet in the home.
6. Improved social interaction. Forget internet matchmaking – a dog is social magnet and a natural conversation starter.

So if you are an empty nester, a four-legged family member might be just the ticket - your miracle on paws. Consider wisely, do your homework, and tap into your resources. The right choice will be one you'll never regret.

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