

Original column for the Inter-Mountain,  
April 2011.

[http://betav2.theintermountain.com/page/content\\_detail/id/542450/Should-I-provide-a-pet-for-mychild-.html?nav=5324](http://betav2.theintermountain.com/page/content_detail/id/542450/Should-I-provide-a-pet-for-mychild-.html?nav=5324)

## Should I provide a pet for my child?

By Ginny Zuboy, RCHS Board Member

I am my grandmother's daughter. "Aunt Lula" as she was called by those who knew and loved her, was always surrounded by dogs and cats, not to mention the neighborhood children who thought of her as their second mom. She had an easy way with animals and children that was evident throughout her life. My grandmother was a great storyteller. As a child, she had a pet goat who liked to climb the stairs in the house and go out on the balcony to view the Mississippi countryside. She said this goat had no tolerance for strangers and would walk up to them from behind and give them a good head butt in the rear end. She laughed heartily as she recalled her childhood days. She lived to be 102.

Throughout my own childhood, my mom was busy having babies and pets were low on her priority list. It was my grandmother who brought me my first "very own" dog. I was 11 years old. She was a sweet shy little dog – a Rat Terrier. I bought her a blue plastic collar with jingle bells on it and named her Ginger. My father believed that dogs "don't belong in the house" so I spent

lots of time outside, to be with her during the day. At night I was allowed to let her sleep on the screened-in porch at the back of the house. I made her a bed and covered her with several blankets right before bedtime. I would tiptoe out, hoping that she wouldn't move from under the covers and be cold in the night. My model of pet ownership was *Lassie* and I knew, way back then, that when I grew up, my dog would live in the house with me. Unfortunately, I didn't have Ginger much more than a year. She developed cancer and died while under veterinary care. I remember standing in the kitchen, clinging to my mom, sobbing. I couldn't understand how God could let that happen to such a sweet little dog.

Well, I did grow up. I met my husband in a New Jersey park during my first year of Montessori teaching. We were both out walking our dogs. He says he saw my red hair and my red dog and "that was that." I don't know which of us he found more attractive, me or my Golden Retriever, but in either case he took us both home and "that was that."

When our daughter began making noises about wanting her "very own" dog, at age 11, I had come full circle. We had an English Setter at the time and my response was to tell her she already had a dog. "No," she replied, "I mean my *very own* dog." I then reminded her that she had her "very own" cat that she had brought home as a scrawny little kitten; that a cat and a dog were enough. My daughter did not accept that edict, not for a minute, but she didn't make a fuss. Instead, she

started carting around this large dog book everywhere she went. She would come join me in the kitchen and open the book upon the counter and begin commenting on the different breeds, trying to engage me in the subject. She followed me throughout the house with that book under her arm. At first I found it funny and sweet. After several days, it went from funny and sweet to annoying. She took that book to bed with her each night, with never a whine or a whimper. At this same time she was keeping a 5<sup>th</sup> grade journal at school which she brought home on Fridays. Christmas was approaching and all she could write about was how much she wanted her “very own” dog...

So, what’s a daughter-loving, dog-loving, mother to do? Talk to her husband. This was a “we” decision. In this case, her persistence paid off. We knew we were making another potential 15 year commitment to dog ownership, to puppy training, vet bills and all that comes with providing a forever home. Even though this animal was for our daughter, we knew that it would be our responsibility.

Things to consider before committing to pet ownership:

1. Dogs and cats can live for 15, up to 20, years. Can you make that kind of commitment? As parents and as responsible adults, we cannot expect our children to even understand that level of commitment. As children grow up they develop interests outside the home. Sports, friends, dating, after school employment, and eventually

college, can take center stage. Along the way, the pet may be lucky to get a pat on the head. My daughter was a case in point for many of the reasons mentioned above. In her case, though, I fell in love and was quite happy to provide her “very own” dog with all that it needed and then some. (We actually brought home two, but that is another article.) Her name was Little Anne and we just lost her in July; my daughter is now 27. Can you ‘stand in’ for your child when it becomes necessary, without resentment or bad feelings?

2. Are you a clean freak? Animals are messy. My mom says that having a dog is like having a two year old who never grows up. Not a bad analogy. Like children, they sometimes get sick in the house and have ‘accidents.’ Dogs can be smelly and slobbery. They come in from outside with muddy paws and dangling debris. Most breeds shed their hair. They can be destructive, particularly puppies. Cats jump up on countertops and can climb virtually anywhere; they sometimes claw the furniture. Can you live with a litter-box? Like children, animals require “stuff.” Pet beds, crates, blankets, toys, and feeding stations may not always fit in with your interior decorating scheme.

3. Are you or anyone in your family allergic to dogs or cats? Be sure to check that out before considering a commitment.

4. If you consider getting a dog, do you have a fenced in yard? Dogs need exercise, and at minimum they must be taken out to “do their business” several

times each day, and that is in rain or snow.

5. Do you travel? Animals can be left alone during the work day, but 8 hours is the outside limit for dogs. What kind of arrangements would be made in the event that you left town? Would you take your pet with you? Some people have the notion that cats can be left alone for days at a time if you provide them with food, water, and a litter box. It is true that they can be left alone more easily than a dog, but they are also social animals and rely on our companionship, even if on their own terms. Being left alone for more than a few days is likely stressful for a cat, as it would be for a dog. If you need or want to travel, do you have a neighbor or relative who could care for the pet during your absence? Would you hire a house sitter or take your pet to a kennel? Are you willing to pay the expense for these services?

6. Animals require some basic training. Too often pets end up in shelters because of behavior problems that were most likely created due to the lack of training of and by the owner. A dog can only learn to 'come' when he is trained to 'come.' We teach and train our children so that they know how to comport themselves in the world. Our pets need training so they know how to behave in the home, on a leash, with visitors, etc. They need to know what we expect of them and training takes time and gentle patience. Like children, our pets want to please us, but we need to lead the way.

7. Pets need annual checkups, the same as our children. They need yearly immunizations and sometimes medications because of allergies or infections or topical wounds. They can have accidents or become ill. They need to be fed a balanced diet. Are you able and willing to pay for the long term care of your pet?

These are just some of the issues that face a prospective pet owner, whether for an adult or the benefit of their child. If not considered before hand, it is often the animal who suffers the consequences.

There is a wealth of research that documents the advantages of pet ownership for children. It can teach them responsibility and respect for living things. They learn lessons about life: illness, accidents, death and bereavement. Pets can provide physical comfort and are great 'listeners.' They provide unconditional love and companionship. Having a pet can help the child learn empathy which is important to the child's development as an emotionally healthy human being. These are all great reasons to provide a child her "very own" pet, but they are not sufficient. Lots of children, including dog lovers like me, grow up in pet-less homes and develop into healthy, happy adults. In other words, if you can't comfortably make the commitment required, as the adults, it is ok to say NO to your child. It is the responsible thing to do. Try to find other ways to meet your child's expressed interest. Consider a pet with a shorter life span, like a hamster or guinea pig, or even

goldfish. Caring for these small animals can provide the same benefits mentioned above if the parents engage in a shared caring, learning experience with their child. Walking and playing with a friend's or neighbor's dog or cat, or accompanying your child or grandchild to the local shelter as a volunteer walker or cat cuddler are ways to provide the child animal contact. Providing stuffed animals for the younger child is also a nice introduction to animal companionship. I had many stuffed animals as a child, several brought to me by my grandmother, and they were very important to me, even through adolescence.

Ultimately, I believe that when parents consider providing a pet for their child, they must, at heart, be pet lovers who understand the commitment required of them, or if new to the experience, be willing to educate themselves with open hearts to the shared family adventure of pet ownership. This must include a conscious commitment to providing a home for the natural life of the animal. In the language of animal shelters across the country, we call that a 'forever' home.

*~Please spay and neuter your pets~*